

The Lebanese Uprising Continues

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Among the mass protests that erupted across the globe in October last year, Lebanon's were some of the largest, targeting both a failing neoliberal system and ingrained sectarianism. Now in their fourth month, the protests are showing no sign of diminishing.

For more than a hundred days, Lebanon has been beset by mass protests, seeing up to a million people in the streets of a country of less than seven million inhabitants. Now known as Lebanon's "October Revolution," the demonstrations have emerged in response to a range of issues, from anti-austerity, the government's mismanagement of the climate disaster, and the full-scale rejection of the country's sectarian political system, entrenched since the Civil War.

Now in its fourth month, the Lebanese protest movement is at a crossroads. Several government reshuffles have done little to placate the movement, and as the debt crisis worsens the government continues to seek IMF assistance, angering the protesters further. There are conflicting ideas within the movement about how best to proceed, and unions are just beginning to reassert themselves for the first time in decades.

To discuss the dynamics of the uprising, and its challenges going forward, Shireen Akram-Boshar spoke with Rima Majed.

SAB | More than a hundred days have passed since the start of Lebanon's revolution. Broad segments of Lebanese society have been involved, with about one in five taking part in protest. What are things like on the ground? How has the uprising maintained its momentum?

RM | Since the revolution kicked into high gear again recently, there are mass protests every day. Protesters are blocking roads, denouncing the newly appointed government, and demonstrating in front of banks and parliament. But there is also a high level of state repression. Over the past two weeks, it has been particularly bad. Dozens have been arrested and hundreds injured. Security forces have specifically targeted protesters' eyes, injuring and blinding several.

The banking sector has been the main target during the latest wave. This is because of the daily humiliation imposed by the banks. It has reached an unbearable level. Poverty rates have increased as well as inflation, but it's not just that. It's also that even those who have just a bit of money in the bank are prevented from accessing it, which amounts to forced impoverishment. The only exceptions are those who are very rich, have connections with the banking elites, or who can transfer money abroad. For the majority, the degradation has reached a level such that it's impossible for things to calm down.

This doesn't mean that the streets will constantly be filled with protesters. Students play a critical role in the revolution, and when protests have decreased, it's often when schools and universities have opened again. But this revolution, even more than the others in the region, began because of an acute economic crisis. And so it will keep going.

Nothing has changed in the past three months to encourage people to go back home. A new government has just been announced, but even before its announcement, we knew it would not have the trust of the people. There's no major change in the ruling elite, and there are no serious measures being taken to deal with the financial crisis.

There has been a lot of talk lately about Hezbollah co-opting the movement. I think it's important to highlight that all the political parties, including Hezbollah, have been trying to co-opt the revolution from the very start. The Lebanese Forces, the Phalangists' Kataeb, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Future Movement after the resignation of [former prime minister Saad] Hariri, all tried at different stages to co-opt the revolution and maneuver within it. The panic recently about Hezbollah's presence is mainly because when they mobilize, they bring sectarianism to the streets. They raise sectarian chants like "Shi'a, Shi'a." It doesn't require much analysis to get it.

But the way the revolution has dealt with it is much better than in our previous protest movements. At the start, there were voices from within the revolution that were saying, "these are infiltrators, we must remove them from the streets, it's Hezbollah." But very quickly this was shut down by people saying that the streets are open; co-option is something that we know we will have to deal with, but it doesn't mean that we have to alienate individuals. These are also occasions to organize differently and to build bridges. The movement has recognized that Hezbollah's base — the vast majority of the Shi'a population in Lebanon — forms a large section of the working class and the working poor.

Having said this, I also recognize that there is a clear danger of political parties, specifically Hezbollah, taking advantage of the revolution. There is an intersection of interest when it comes to targeting the banking system. And this is why the demands to the bank have to be clear in a way that would not leave room for Hezbollah or other parties in power to be able to mobilize around the same demands.

This is part of how the revolution must radicalize and adapt its discourse. Instead of saying, "We don't accept the poor who are the constituency of certain parties," or accusing them of being infiltrators and traitors, we must instead adopt a discourse that links the problem of the banking sector not just with the neoliberal system and the financial system that we are against — this is a discourse that Hezbollah would also agree to even though in practice they have backed all the neoliberal policies for the decade that they were in power — but also a discourse that brings in the political vision we are working for.

SAB | Lebanon's revolution has been marked not only by mass protest, but also ideological advance and a rejection of the political establishment to an extent not seen in previous uprisings. The revolution has also managed to show the connections between economic and political grievances. To what extent has political consciousness been transformed?

RM | To a huge extent. This has come from an accumulation of decades of activism, as well as lessons learned from previous movements both in Lebanon and across the region. One example is the 2015 "YouStink" movement. Because of these experiences, the movement is now more aware of class dynamics, and careful not to alienate people who still ascribe to sectarian political parties — particularly the poorer sections of the working class who have come to make up Hezbollah's base. This is a major advance from 2015.

On the other hand, the weakest link is that of organization, which protesters are only now beginning to take up. My fear for the months and years to come revolves around the fact that we haven't yet been able to become organized. It is especially difficult since we are just beginning the process, within the revolution, rather than before it.

To me it seems there are three streams within the revolution. There's a radical stream, or one that has become more radicalized. It has been thinking intersectionally, centering class inequality, gender inequality, and the questions of citizenship, race, and refugees. It is mobilizing around all these issues and making links between them, and demanding an overhaul of the neoliberal economic system as well as the sectarian political system.

The second stream is more liberal. It considers the problem not to be a systemic one but rather a problem of corruption, and that substituting individual politicians for "cleaner" or less corrupt leaders will be enough. This is the more NGO-ized stream. It has a major presence in the revolution, and there are serious debates between it and the more radical stream.

And then there are the vast groups that are not organized, and that are mobilizing in ways that are more ad hoc. This third stream came together organically, it doesn't have a clear political project or vision. The challenge is how to bring these three different streams together in order to advance the movement.

It is important to understand that Lebanon's protesters are challenging not only a neoliberal system, but also the country's sectarian system. The two are inseparable. Protesters' demands for an end to economic degradation — essentially an end to the neoliberal system — through reinstating elements of a welfare state would mean an end to the sectarian system, too. It would mean not having to go to your sectarian za'im [leader or boss] to be able to get your basic needs met, thus making the sectarian system redundant.

The revolution poses a serious threat to sectarian leaders because it is the first time in the modern history of Lebanon that such massive numbers have mobilized clearly against them. Those protesting have an underlying class awareness and view the sectarian leaders as corrupt rulers who accumulate wealth at the expense of the majority. Any mobilization in Lebanon that takes on a class dynamic and brings people together based on interests outside the logic of sectarianism is considered a threat to the sectarian system — which can only flourish by making people dependent on the clientele-based services of their leaders. Any pressure toward labor rights and demands for welfare from the state represent a serious threat to sectarian leaders.

SAB | The Lebanese ruling class has been working diligently since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 to destroy cross-sect working-class organization and with it, the Left. The progressive weakening of the working-class movement and the Left has impeded any organized fightback, while also depoliticizing much of society. Given this, what are the possibilities for organizing?

RM | You're right, it's clear that in postwar Lebanon the regime systematically extinguished any possibility for organizing. Not just cross-sect organizing: the first thing they destroyed was the unions. Today, the General Confederation of Unions in Lebanon is completely co-opted by the regime, and represents less than 5 percent of workers. It has done nothing to support the revolution — only issuing a weak statement after we protested in front of their offices.

But this is a revolution that is so clearly about class issues. And this was clear from the very first day: grievances had to do with taxation, the financial collapse, and the pegging of the Lebanese lira to the dollar. It's impossible to overlook this and just think about political organizing without having to deal with the question of class. It is a good opportunity to organize along class lines and to bring back labor and the social question as entry points for those wanting change.

In Lebanon, the geopolitical focus has taken center stage in the political discourse for decades. Focus on regional tensions and sectarianism has overshadowed class, gender, and labor. The

revolution has re-centered discourse onto the social question. And within the revolution, the Left is finally beginning to take seriously the question of organization, rather than continuing to insist on the need for leaderless-ness.

Unlike in 2015, many of the activists today are convinced that there is a need for political organization and for preparing ourselves for the coming rounds of upheaval. Some are trying to organize through communes in the region ('Ammieh), under the name of "Communes of October 17th." Others have organized at the neighborhood level, especially activists who were blocking roads at the beginning of the revolution.

Some groups existed previously, including Li Haqqi and Beirut Madinati, and they are part of larger coordination groups that bring together various groups mobilizing on the ground. Finally, some are trying to create a new leftist coalition that is at once anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarianism, and that is clearly in support of all popular uprisings from Syria to Bahrain.

SAB | Could you tell us more about Lebanon's Professionals' Association, which you took part in founding?

RM | For many of us who followed the revolutions in the region, we saw that the only two revolutions that were able to create some sort of transition were Tunisia and Sudan. It was clear that this was because of the presence of organized and independent unions. Along with others, I was convinced that the only way for us in Lebanon to break with the sectarian, neoliberal system was by reclaiming the unions. It seemed obvious from the start of the revolution that this is our chance to do something class-based. So the question of labor is at the core of imagining political change in the country.

We started to organize within the first few days of the revolution with two main goals. The first was organizing politically to support and push the revolution forward. The second was reclaiming labor and professional unions and organizations. This comes with its challenges, not least the fact that activism has for decades been shaped around values that are very neoliberal, very individualistic, and with lots of internal divisions. But even with all of that, I think this is an initiative that has a lot of potential. It is one of the very few places where I see hope for the long term. It is only by reclaiming our interests as social groups and classes, rather than sects and identity, that we will be able to fight a neoliberal, sectarian system that is constantly trying to make us individuals and not groups based on anything other than sect.

And this is where I think the Professionals' Association can play an important role in changing political culture. The most radical movements in the past decade in Lebanon — all of which are really important initiatives — have also been affected by the neoliberal system. Just look at the names of the movements: Beirut Madinati (Beirut is my city), it's never *madinatona* (our city); Li Haqqi (for my rights), it's not our rights; Hathal Bahro Li (it's my sea), it's not our sea. And even when the revolution started, those groups were spraying on banks, *rudduli masriyati* (give me back my money). As if the problem is individual, and if the bank gives me back my money, then I'm fine. This is what a neoliberal system does to our political consciousness. And until we reclaim a different "we" that is not the sectarian "we" but the "we" that is based on our interests as social classes, it will be very difficult to break away from this system. Because sectarianism is not separate from neoliberalism, it is the other side of the coin. Sectarianism depends on capitalism and neoliberalism, and you need to break with both at the same time.

SAB | What forces make up the Lebanese Professionals' Association? What has it accomplished thus far, and what is it taking on now?

RM | The association includes professionals and workers from different sectors including university professors, schoolteachers, engineers and architects, medical doctors, workers in the cultural sector, journalists, and lawyers. The association has planned some of the largest marches during the uprising. It also held a series of public debates in various squares around the country. It is currently organizing internally and working on finalizing its founding documents, including its mission, vision, and internal structure. Through the Independent University Professors' Association, the Professionals' Association has worked closely with students and continues to coordinate with a number of political groups, grassroots organizations, and student groups within the revolution.

SAB | Lebanon's revolution is currently at a sort of impasse, with protesters rejecting the political system and the elites, and the latter refusing to budge. As the economic situation continues to worsen, and the banks punish working-class people, protesters have responded with a campaign that directly targets the banks. And yet a major demand in the street is still to replace the politicians with technocrats. What's this about?

RM | This is why I say the revolution is a process, not an event. It has its own contradictions, like everything else, and it is the dialectical relationship between the different streams that is going to create whatever comes next. The short term is going to be very difficult. We don't have a clear alternative to take the place of the current system; there is no vanguard to steer the way. This is not a revolutionary coup, it is more of a social explosion that has ushered in a long revolutionary process that will go through many ups and downs.

We know that we need a haircut, we need capital controls, but who is going to impose that? The political elites? We know that they won't. Nationalizing the banks — yes, of course. But under which regime? Do I give the banking sector to those who are now in power? And there are big debates over constitutional change, including whether the constitution simply needs to be applied more diligently, or whether we should change the whole constitution. These are all very difficult questions.

This is why I think it's good for the radicals in the revolution to "demand the impossible," as Che Guevara would say. We need to believe in the possibility of change and to fight for it, but also to think of the mechanisms — how do we reach our goal? This is where organization is key, and where clear alternatives to the status quo become important. And this is also where the whole discourse of refusing to provide leadership becomes so clearly counterproductive. What does it mean to be a revolution that doesn't want to get to power?

Even the basic demands for electricity and water clearly show the need for a radical break with the system. We don't need a technocratic government or groups of "experts" to give advice about how to get electricity. It's not rocket science. Lebanon doesn't have electricity, but it's not because we haven't figured out how to get electricity. It's a political problem.

The ruling elites are still acting as if there's no revolution. Although the pressure on them is intensifying, they will keep bouncing back until the revolution has a leadership that is able to translate street pressure into political gains, and to shape a transitional period based on the aspirations of the hundreds of thousands in the streets today. At the moment, the revolution is fueled by the masses who are just angry and exploding, but without a clear strategy to pressure for a particular type of political, economic, and social change.

SAB | What are the major tactics of the counterrevolution at this stage? Do ruling-class sectarian narratives still have a pull?

RM | The counterrevolution utilizes three main tactics. The first is co-option. The political parties insist that they are also against the state, and they are also against the ruling class. All politicians in

Lebanon have gone on television saying that they are against the ruling elites, as if they are not part of that elite. And they call on their constituencies to mobilize, only to then create tensions in the streets.

The second tactic is repression, which is imposed via the three main arms of the security apparatus — the police, the army, and the *zo'ran*, the militiamen of the sectarian political parties. They are very strategic. The last round of heavy repression saw the army using violence against protesters in south Lebanon and the police consistently repressing protests in Beirut for several days, resulting in a number of serious injuries, hundreds of arrests, and a campaign of burning protest tents by the security forces.

And the third tactic is sectarian division. This revolution represents a dangerous threat to sectarian leaders, especially in that it articulates class-based demands. This is why attempts at sectarian division started from the very beginning and very clearly. I mean when you send people to the street to shout “Shi’a, Shi’a,” what are you doing? In regions like some parts of the south where almost everyone is Shi’a, they were mobilizing, chanting, “Shi’a, Shi’a,” and people were replying to them, “And so are we, and so are we!”

For a country like Lebanon where sectarianism is so ingrained in the everyday, the ruling parties have failed dramatically to stoke sectarianism so far. It means a lot that three months into the revolution, these attempts have very clearly failed. And I think Hezbollah’s decision to mobilize against the banks recently is because they realize it’s not as easy to whip up sectarianism now. It’s just not the same.

Sectarianism depends on the networks of clientelism which are not only about money but also non-state welfare and security. This becomes more difficult in the context of economic crisis. The question arises, will they be able to provide? There were already cuts before the revolution started. The situation threatens to expose the shallowness of the sectarian system — if you don’t provide the basic services, people are not going to stay with you.

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