

Industrial Disasters: Lebanon's corrupt capitalism behind Beirut blast

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An explosion at the Port of Beirut has devastated the city, killing more than 130 people and wounding thousands more. It is an enormous tragedy; a huge blow to a population already reeling from economic, political and health crises. Corruption and incompetence are to blame, but the truth is more pernicious. The Lebanese events are another indictment on the barbaric capitalist system, which cannot meet the most basic needs of the people who are trapped within it.

The most obvious issue is the criminal negligence of the port authorities, who allowed a mountain of explosives to sit in a warehouse in the heart of Lebanon's capital for more than six years. There is no possible world in which this was a minor mistake, or a detail that slipped the minds of the managers of the highly profitable port. An Al Jazeera investigation found that at least six letters were sent by customs officials to judicial authorities requesting an urgent resolution of the matter, none of which received a reply. It's not simply a matter of complacent judges. The entire political class is to blame for creating a culture in which bribery, personal advancement and profiteering are the norm - in which the endless jockeying for power and wealth has obliterated any conception of serving the people.

This ineptitude is reflected in other spheres. Images from the immediate aftermath of the explosion showed blood on the streets as ambulances, scooters and private vehicles desperately drove thousands of victims to Lebanon's hospitals. Yet the blast wiped out two of the main hospitals in Beirut, which had to be evacuated following the blast. Many of the remaining hospitals were severely damaged, making them unsafe for treatment. Worse, they were already overrun by the rising number of COVID-19 patients. There are now reports of people being treated in corridors and sent to regional clinics. Those with minor injuries are discouraged from reporting for treatment altogether because, as the New York Times reports, a warehouse holding much of Lebanon's medical supplies may have been destroyed.

An incredible 300,000 people lost their homes in the blast, with many more left trying to repair and refurnish their shattered lives. Footage online showed families gathered by windows kilometres away from the blast being blown away by the shockwaves and broken glass. Few residents have insurance, and those that do will struggle to get appropriate payouts, given the country's runaway inflation.

Unemployment, already sky high because of recent economic turmoil, will rise again because many small businesses do not have the funds or the customer base to reopen. In April, the World Bank estimated that 45 percent of the population lives in poverty. This crisis will impoverish many hundreds of thousands more. Less urgent, but of significance to the left, is that some of the ravaged areas were home to a lively youth subculture that was leftist and inclusive. Who knows whether suburbs such as Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael can revive as hubs for the flourishing activist scene.

"We have lost everything, we have lost our memories, our streets, our lives, our hope", Rima Majed, a socialist and union activist at the American University of Beirut, lamented on Facebook. "This mafia, every single one of them is responsible ... for making this country an open hell".

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Lebanon has been the site of a number of substantial protest movements in recent years, each of which has grown larger and more popular. From the 2015-16 "You stink!" campaign against the corporate mismanagement of rubbish processing in Beirut, to last year's "October revolution" - triggered by the government announcing a \$6 per month tax on internet voice calls such as WhatsApp - activists have shown a growing preparedness to challenge the entire economic and political elite.

Because of this recent history, the country is primed to respond to this latest atrocity. And activists didn't need much prompting - online, they've revived hashtags from the revolution as well as developing a new one: "prepare the nooses". One viral tweet contains a picture of every major political leader with the caption, "Stop the prayers, you know what to do", while another is a photo of a balcony in Beirut with a hand-drawn placard of a noose. One of the most popular is a list of Lebanese billionaires accompanied by the comment: "Before we ask Kylie to open her purse, ask those to empty theirs". (The reference is to US celebrity businessperson Kylie Jenner, who asked her social media followers to make donations.)

As the initial shock abates, it's likely that this anger will find expression on the streets. To forestall the coming rebellion, the unpopular government has declared a two week **state of emergency** and given extraordinary power to the military. It's unlikely this authoritarian move will succeed in squashing popular outrage. Yesterday, a small number of protesters attacked Saad Hariri's convoy in Beirut. Hariri is a prominent pro-Saudi millionaire, as well as a former prime minister, and is widely despised.

Hariri and the entire political and economic establishment are responsible for the humiliating state of Lebanese society and the economy. Decades of privatisation, cuts to social services and welfare have left the poor vulnerable to the slightest economic shock. Most homes still have irregular access to overpriced electricity and have to purchase bottled water.

To aid the financial speculators at the heart of Lebanese capitalism, authorities artificially inflated the Lebanese lira via its peg to the US dollar. But this system collapsed in recent months, leading to an inflation rate of more than **400 percent**. The dramatic decline in the currency's purchasing power sent most of the population broke. Lebanese banks now refuse to let customers withdraw US dollars from their accounts, insisting that they take the collapsing lira. Yet the banks continue to trade using the official exchange rate, which means that they can pass all the costs of inflation onto their customers. In this way they extract millions from workers and the poor, while the rich have been allowed to expatriate their wealth offshore.

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Beirut used to be described as the Paris of the Middle East. Today it is a hard, grey city suffering from too much poverty, too many cars, too much noise, too few green spaces. The roads lack both rules and footpaths, forcing pedestrians to weave around construction debris, overflowing garbage and vehicles moving erratically through the narrow streets. In the political and economic heart of Lebanon, roughly two and a half million people eke out a living in this way, more than a third of the country's population.

The city is used to violence and explosions. It survived one of the Middle East's worst civil wars through the 1970s and 1980s, when sectarian gangsters and their imperial allies hijacked and destroyed a dynamic and radical movement from below initiated by students and workers. Though battles and massacres went on for years, they were shorn of any social content, becoming apolitical and nihilistic rituals coordinated by millionaire warlords with the sole goal of defending and extending their power.

The scars of those terrible years – when the streets and the people were rigidly divided, Muslim vs Christian, west vs east – are still visible. Bullet holes riddle the buildings in poorer neighbourhoods, often covered by enormous pictures of sectarian figureheads more interested in farming votes than helping their so-called community. The divisions produced by the civil war years are felt on the streets, and political loyalties have remained, until recent rounds of activism, relatively fixed.

Yet some things have changed since the war. The elites in Lebanon are more diverse, Sunni and Shia names more frequently entering the top 100 rich list. As a result, the city is no longer divided primarily between wealthy Christian and poor Muslim areas, but by class. The Islamist political party Hezbollah, once a contradictory expression of the aspirations of the downtrodden Shia community, is now an entrenched part of the Lebanese elite. This is reflected most clearly in its strategic alliance with Michael Aoun, one of the most bloodthirsty right-wing figures from the civil war. Periodic clashes with Israel are mere theatre to disguise Hezbollah's role in the plundering of Lebanon by the capitalist class, alongside its so-called enemies in the March 14 alliance.

Too often, problems in Lebanon are blamed on "corruption" and "incompetence". While there's an element of truth in the accusations, these issues arise from the workings of a society based on profit for the few at the expense of most of the population. Right-wing publications such as the Financial Times cry crocodile tears for the people of Beirut, and then recommend more technocratic capitalism as the solution. The truth is that capitalism cannot exist without corruption, incompetence and murder. The entire system is to blame, from the Lebanese capitalists who run it, to the global capitalists who advise them.

The only just response to this horrendous new crime committed against the city of Beirut and its long-suffering people is to smash the system that produces such misery. The workers, students and poor of Lebanon have shown themselves capable of shaking the foundations of the system in recent times. Now it's time to finish the job.

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P.S.

- Red Flag. 06 August 2020:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/7311>

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