

# Catastrophe in Lebanon

A Criminal Tragedy Rooted in Sectarianism and Neoliberalism

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**On August 4, 2020, a new tragedy struck Lebanon. An explosion of unprecedented magnitude in the country's history occurred in the port of Beirut and left more than 180 dead (Lebanese, Syrians and other nationalities), more than 6,500 injured and 300,000 homeless. Dozens of people also remain missing and entire districts of Beirut have been devastated. The explosion flattened large sectors of the port of Beirut, which received more than 70 percent of the value of country's imported goods in 2019, and also destroyed Lebanon's strategic grain reserve.**

This catastrophe, on top of the pandemic and deep recession, is the product of the country's neoliberal political system and the different fractions of the bourgeois parties that rule it. It is thus not an accident, but a crime. The parties place their sectarian ambition for political power and narrow pursuit of profit before all else, even to the point of neglecting the very lives of those they exploit and oppress.

If there is a saving grace amidst this disaster, it is the revival of the struggle that had swept the country over the last year, part of the regional revolutionary process that had reemerged in 2019. The challenge for the movement is building popular organizations of struggle and political parties to provide an alternative to the neoliberal and sectarian system. If it is unable to do so, it runs the risk of being trapped in new elections that change nothing.

## THE ERUPTION OF STRUGGLE IN 2019

In October 2019, a protest movement erupted in Lebanon following the decision of the government to impose new taxes, including on instant messaging applications like WhatsApp. Its roots are, however, much deeper, in the neoliberal policies implemented since the 1990s following the official end of the Lebanese Civil War. These policies led to the intensification of the specific, historically constituted, characteristics of the Lebanese economy: a finance and service-oriented development model in which social inequalities and regional disparities are very pronounced.

The scale and breadth of the initial demonstrations in the first few days of October 2019 uprising far outstrips previous uprisings: in early 2011, during the beginning of the MENA uprisings; in 2012 and 2014, over labor conditions; and in the summer of 2015, over sanitation. This time, unlike previous waves, protests exploded throughout the country and not only in the capital Beirut. The social composition of the new movement also distinguished it from past protests: it is much more rooted in the popular and working classes than the middle-class-heavy demonstrations of 2011 and 2015.

The working and popular classes in Lebanon have been buffeted by declining living standards for years. Between 2010 and 2016 the incomes of the poorest households stagnated or dropped, and unemployment remained stubbornly high: only one third of the working-age population had a job, and joblessness among those under thirty-five ran as high as 37 percent. Between 40 and 50 percent of Lebanese residents lacked access to social assistance. Temporary foreign workers, estimated at 1

million, were denied all social protections. According to a study by the Central Statistical Office, half of workers and more than a third of the country's farmers were below the poverty line prior to the protest movement in October 2019.

Contrast this with grotesque concentration of wealth in the hands of the country's ruling class. Between 2005 and 2014, the richest 10 percent pocketed, on average, 56 percent of the national income. The wealthiest 1 percent, just over 37,000 people, captured 23 percent of the income generated — as much as the poorest 50 percent, more than 1.5 million people. In 2019, the top 10 per cent of adults owned [70.6 per cent of the country's wealth](#).

The eruption of the economic crisis in October 2019 and the effects of the pandemic only worsened the lives of Lebanon's popular classes. About 1.7 million individuals, or 45 percent of the Lebanese population, were already below the upper poverty line in April. The pandemic drove the poverty rate above 50 percent increased the unemployment rate to over 35 percent. At the same time, the value of the Lebanese currency has been in free fall for several months, leading to an inflation rate of over 400 percent. The purchasing power of the working classes diminished massively, especially in a country that imports massively from abroad. In 2019, Lebanon imported \$20.3 billion, while it exported the equivalent of \$3.8 billion. This situation led to a trade deficit of over \$16 billion.

The devastating explosion made an already dire socio-economic situation unimaginably worse. Lebanese GDP is now expected to contract by an additional 9 percentage points as a result of the disaster, dropping another 15 to 24 percent by the end of 2020. It is no exaggeration to describe the economy as being in free fall.

Foreign workers subjected to the "kafala" system, which deprives them of their basic civil and human rights, found themselves, like many Lebanese, homeless after the tragedy. They were already in dire conditions amidst the pandemic, denied any access to healthcare and subject to racist discrimination. These conditions drove workers from sub-Saharan African countries to protest in front of their embassies to demand their return to home. Similarly, Syrian refugees have suffered impoverishment and abuse.

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The movement, however, has subsided toward the end of the year. The government took advantage of the pandemic to announce a lockdown nominally to protect public health, but in fact to quell the protests. At least for a time, they succeeded.

## **BLAME FOR THE CATASTROPHE**

The explosion turned a terrible situation into a catastrophe. The immediate cause was the detonation caused by 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrates stored at the port of Beirut; it created a huge crater of 140 meters in diameter, destroyed several neighborhoods, and caused destruction stretching several miles into the city. Entire blocks of buildings within a perimeter of a few miles from the port are uninhabitable because they are on the verge of collapse.

The Beirut explosion was equivalent to 1 to 2 kilotons of TNT. By comparison, the Hiroshima bomb in August 1945 exploded with an energy equivalent to 12-15 kilotons. The material damage amounts to billions of dollars - an estimate of 15 billion has been put forward by the authorities.

Ammonium nitrate should never have been stored in the middle of a city, and especially without any security measures. The presence of this extremely dangerous product was well known to port and

state authorities. Lebanese security officials warned the Prime Minister and the Lebanese President at the end of July 2020 of the presence of the stockpile.

Hassan Kraytem, the CEO of the Committee for the Management and Operation of the Port of Beirut, admitted on a Lebanese television channel, that he knew “that these products were dangerous, but not that much.” For his part, the director of customs, Badri Daher, questioned by the Lebanese media if fireworks were stored nearby, replied simply “very likely, yes.”

In the aftermath of the tragedy, all dominant political parties denied any knowledge and/or responsibility for storing the ammonium nitrate in the port. They are lying. The port and its management and customs inspection are controlled by people affiliated with the dominant actors of the Lebanese political system, in particular of the Free Patriotic Movement, Amal, Hezbollah and the Future Movement.

These are parties benefit from Lebanon’s political system, which is organized along sectarian lines with representation apportioned by religious sect. Positions in public institutions, especially its highest ones, also follow sectarian and partisan lines. The sectarian system in Lebanon (like sectarianism more generally) is one of the main instruments used by the country’s bourgeois parties to divide and rule the popular classes. These parties will do anything in their power to protect this political system.

The extent of their perfidy was demonstrated when President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah’s Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah opposed any international investigation into the August 4 tragedy. They claimed they were defending Lebanese sovereignty. And, instead, they declared their preference for Lebanese army to conduct the investigation. But that army is dominated by these two sectarian political parties.

Clearly, Aoun, Nasrallah and all the rest want to protect themselves, their parties, and the whole set up from being found culpable for this criminal tragedy. Lebanese authorities, who promised that the first results of Army’s investigation would be released within a maximum of five days, but still now more than a week since the explosion there has been nothing announced.

The sectarian parties are also trying to block any independent and full judicial inquiry into the disaster. They, for example, prevented the appointment of Samer Younès, considered as an independent to oversee it. Instead, they handpicked a military judge, Fadi Sawan, to carry it out. Thus, the sectarian parties are guilty of what amounts to a cover up of their criminal responsibility for the disaster. They are doing so not only to protect their rule, but the entire sectarian system.

## **WHAT NEXT FOR THE MOVEMENT?**

Even before the official end of Lebanon’s lockdown in mid-April, demonstrations had resumed in defiance of the government. Protesters across the country revived the slogans from October, denouncing the entire Lebanese sectarian and neoliberal system.

Demonstrators have targeted the banks in particular, ransacking several head offices and branches in different regions of the country. Some of these banks are controlled by the sectarian bourgeois political elites who have used them to dictate the country’s economic policy concentrate monumental profits in their hands. People targeted them because of their role in the country’s current economic crisis and allowing the big financiers to smuggle their money out of the country.

The explosion forced people to turn from protest to mutual aid. They built solidarity between the popular classes across sectarian, national and racial divisions. Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and migrant laborers from sub-Saharan Africa came to each other’s assistance, opening their houses to

those who had lost theirs, collaborating on clearing the streets of rubble, and providing food assistance to one another.

And then these masses poured into the streets in protests. On the weekend of August 8 and 9, massive demonstrations took place in Beirut to demand justice against those responsible for the criminal tragedy and the overthrow of all political parties in the ruling system without exception. Protesters stormed and occupied public institutions such as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economy, Environment and Energy, as well as the Association of Banks in Lebanon.

In Beirut's central square, Martyrs Square, the main slogan was "Judgment Day." People built wooden guillotines. The hashtag #HangThem has been circulating for several days on social networks. The demonstrators chanted, "Revenge, revenge, until the fall of the regime."

Terrified of the mass upsurge, the Lebanese army and militias linked to the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Nabih Berri and other sectarian parties violently cracked down on protesters. They went so far as to fire live ammunition on protesters in Beirut. There have been several hundred injured and dozens of arrests.

But the country's rulers knew that repression would not be enough. So they orchestrated the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government, on August 10, the day after the massive popular protests. They hoped to placate the protesters with promises of a new united national government and early elections. But so far, it has not worked as demonstrations continue throughout the country.

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The dominant parties hope to lure the people back into the sectarian system. Thus, a few hours after Diab's resignation, the speaker of parliament Nabih Berry spoke with the head of the Free Patriotic Movement Gebran Bassil as well as with Hussein Khalil, right-hand man of the secretary general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah. The participants agreed on the formation of a national united government and on early legislative elections within the same sectarian political system.

Hezbollah has been particularly adamant in defending the sectarian system. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Hassan Nasrallah accused protesters of leading the country into civil war by wanting to overthrow the state and President Aoun. Hezbollah, like other sectarian bourgeois political parties, perceives the popular movement as an existential threat and opposes its basic demands for radical change.

With the offer of elections failing to quell the protests, all the main sectarian parties united to declare a state of emergency. This gives it "supreme military power" over all the security forces of the country and the responsibility of maintaining the order. During the state of emergency, it can use the Lebanese army can to make arrests without recourse to justice, limit freedom of the press and the media, prohibit gatherings, and curtail countless other democratic freedoms.

Thus, the dominant sectarian bourgeois political parties want to put an end to the uprising.

## **A POLITICAL VACUUM OF WORKING CLASS ORGANIZATION**

The challenge the movement faces amidst this crackdown is the absence of mass non-sectarian organizations and parties rooted in the country's popular classes. Right now, they do not yet exist and that weakens the movement's ability to cohere itself into a social and political challenge to the sectarian parties and their system. And it leaves space open for the sectarian bourgeois parties to mobilize their confessional bases to repress the movement and shape the elections.

Imperialist and regional states will back the sectarian parties to preserve existing political and economic order in Lebanon. For example, Iran backs Hezbollah while Saudi Arabia has supported in the past the Future Movement and to a lesser extent the Lebanese Forces. Already, French President Emmanuel Macron, while posturing as a savior of the country's masses, has called for a new united national government of all the sectarian parties. This solution has the support of many regional and international countries.

Alongside this call, Macron and IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva have repeatedly demanded neoliberal reforms in exchange for any disaster relief. They have offered a billion in loans and grants on the condition that the Lebanese government develop public-private partnerships, reduce the level of debt, and enact austerity measures. The Lebanese sectarian bourgeois parties, already deeply committed to neoliberalism, will be happy to oblige the international financial institutions as they have done so for decades, laughing all the way to their banks. Imperialist powers, regional states, and international monetary institutions are protecting the sectarian political system and imposing neoliberal disaster capitalism that will be paid for by the country's impoverished masses.

In this context, the call for early elections within the framework of the same sectarian system is a trap for popular forces demanding radical change. The movement needs time and space to develop mass movement organizations and progressive, inclusive and non-sectarian parties rooted in the popular classes in Lebanon. Without those, the sectarian bourgeois parties are the best positioned to win the elections if they go ahead as planned.

The various sectors of the left and progressives are very fragmented within the protest movement and have not been able to build a united front capable of channeling demands and organizing demonstrators across the country. The creation of forms of dual power is an urgent political necessity in order to challenge the state and the sectarian bourgeois political parties.

The weakness of working-class organizations is an enduring predicament and is not an accident. Sectarian bourgeois parties have actively intervened in the labor movement since the 1990s, splitting it into separate confessional federations and unions in numerous sectors. Their goal was to weaken the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). As a result, the CGTL has been unable to organize and mobilize workers despite intensifying neoliberal policies.

They carried out a similar strategy against the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), which led labor protests between 2011 and 2014. They united in the January 2015's elections against the combative trade unionist Hanna Gharib, who only managed to draw support from independents and the Lebanese Communist Party. The UCC's influence has waned since then. Both institutions have been completely absent since the eruption of the protest movement in October 2019.

## **WHITHER LEBANON?**

Lebanon's protest movement remains resilient and radical. It has now added demands for justice and accountability for the criminal explosion to those raised during October 2019 for social justice and the redistribution of the country's wealth. These demands drive the movement into opposition to the sectarian political system, which supports the privileges of economic and political elites.

Whole swathes of the population burn with anger at the political and economic system. The popular classes know that the dominant sectarian parties and the various fractions of the bourgeoisie used control of government ministries and crony privatization to enrich themselves and consolidate networks of political and economic patronage. They realize that their poverty—that of Lebanese, the migrants, and the refugees—are a direct result of this system.

That is why the masses raised the slogan “all means all” in the great wave of protest amidst the disaster. They were calling for the downfall not just of this or that politician but the whole neoliberal and sectarian system, and all its regional and imperialist state sponsors. No radical change can take place without that system being overthrown.

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