Youth Protests in Lebanon: "All of Them Means All of Them"

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Abstract

On October 17, 2019, massive protests erupted in Lebanon, calling for the resignation of the country's political leaders who had dominated its political life for three decades through patronage and corruption. The agenda of the protesters included demands for an independent government and a civil state. Youth constituted the main bulk of the protesters, with students at the core. The students engaged in the rallies, called for the support of the public university, and participated actively in daily discussion groups organized in public spaces.

For three decades, from 1990 to 2019, six elected leaders controlled the economic and political system of Lebanon. Many of them are civil war-era (1975–1990) warlords, whose power allowed them to avoid accountability. Apply game theory, and you can understand how this situation came to be. Each of the main players pretends that he is defending the rights of his sectarian community through power sharing, with the implicit threat that he could mobilize "his" people against the others. In fact, these same leaders used to form governments under the banner of "national unity" to legitimize their despotic leadership within each community.

The "power sharing" of the Lebanese political system meant mutual acceptance by these leaders of political interference in all public institutions, at all layers of the public administration, from the executive leadership down to ground-level bureaucrats, and in all kinds of public deals. This patronage and partisanship has facilitated corruption on a large scale, contributing to a continuous deterioration of all public services and leading to a severe economic crisis.

The Eruption of Protests

No one could have imagined, on October 16, 2019, that these strong leaders would soon face chants of the slogan "All of them means all of them. Out!" This slogan animated massive protests across the country, a new development in the country's recent history.

Late in the afternoon of Thursday, October 17th, the government took the decision to impose a new tax on Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls, such as those made on FaceTime, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Within half an hour, the streets were occupied by protesters. By 11pm the same day, the prime minister announced the tax's cancellation, but the protests have continued for months since.

In taxing VoIP calls, the government seemed to be attacking the country's youth. Services like WhatsApp are a free means of communication, to exchange messages, photos, songs, news, jokes, etc., where peers have fun, socialize, date, organize social events, and communicate with their relatives—as every Lebanese family has at least one member abroad.

The first to take to the streets were those who had been left behind: marginalized youth, the unemployed, and school dropouts. In other words, those who, on the afternoon of October 17th, were likely to be found socializing in the street or at a popular café. (Ironically, it so happens that the official who suggested the tax, the minister of communication, is one of the tycoons of the Lebanese business class and has recently

been accused by mass media of engaging in corrupt practices with one of the country's two telecommunications companies.)

The protesters who followed next included youth from a range of social backgrounds—students and university graduates, men and women, from across the country. In Lebanon, youth between 15 and 30, no longer children but not yet in charge of a family, constitute a considerable fraction of the total population (30 percent). Beside their indignation at the whole political system, these youths have a high unemployment rate (17.3 percent in 2018), making emigration the only option for many in order to obtain acceptable employment. This fact was reflected in the demonstrators' slogans, which included, "We want to stop dreaming of getting visas" and "You can't force us to emigrate." Most analysts agree that Lebanon spends a lot of money on education (almost 13 percent of the GDP) and sends its educated human capital to other countries. During the protests, many flights were bringing youth back just to participate in rallies, and youth in the diaspora staged supportive demonstrations in many cities around the world. Among them, women have an additional grievance: they are not allowed to pass their Lebanese nationality to their children when they marry non-Lebanese men.

Student Protests

Due to their dire material conditions, rebellious character, use of social media, and dynamism, among other factors, youth constituted the engine of the October 17th uprising in Lebanon. Other segments of the population also played an important role during the uprising, including men and women with their children, doctors, lawyers, and university staff. All categories of participants share a common political vision, condemning the incumbent political class and calling for an "independent" government and a "civil state."

Students were the core group among the youth. University and high school students walked out of, or skipped, classes to join massive rallies around the country. They were joining what could be called "protest schools": dozens of tents were set up in public spaces in the main cities, where economic, political, cultural, legal, and higher education issues were discussed among students, professors, journalists, and activists on a daily basis. "Here we learn citizenship by practice, not lies disseminated in textbooks," they said, as well as "here we learn real history, not that of corrupt leaders."

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The students chanted the national anthem, raised the national flag, and expressed their collective indignation at the political class. They called for employment based on merit, autonomy from political interference for the Lebanese University, and payment of fees in Lebanese pounds, not in US dollars, at private institutions. More significantly, students were organized through independent groups beyond and against formal committees and student unions, which are dominated by youth members of the governing political parties. Some of this activism took place at specific universities, but much of it was organized across universities, mainly the American University of Beirut, Saint-Joseph University, and the Lebanese University.

Counter-Protests

A Mothers' March took place on November 27, 2019. It was dedicated to condemning the incursion of youth partisans of two Muslim political leaders into a Christian neighborhood during the previous evening. For the mothers, who hailed from both Muslim and Christian neighborhoods, this incident brought to mind the civil war and they wanted to prevent a return of this type of violence on sectarian lines.

Such risk of "horizontal" or sectarian conflict shows up every time "outsiders" suddenly attack peaceful protesters—or even security forces, which keep neutral most of the time. The November 26th incident was one of several street manifestations of the political leaders' game, to divert youth protests or put pressure on one another. Yet, though political leaders continue playing their long-established game, all signs show that there is currently little room for them to mobilize their sectarian communities for outright violent conflict.

The uprising has not yet achieved its central demands. However, things are not the same as they were on October 16th. A process of social change was set in motion on October 17th. The protests left no one in the ruling political class unscathed, even within their own camps. But the future of the whole political system is still to be written. ◢

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