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Arab Revolutions

Lebanon's 'October Revolution' must go on!

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Lebanon has a golden opportunity for the formation of an alternative, we should not let the ruling class reproduce itself again.

The 'streets' of Lebanon have exploded in massive protests since October 17th. Following months of austerity and dire economic conditions, a shortage of US dollars that caused a serious threat of devaluation of the Lebanese currency resulting in a potential crisis of gasoline and bread, the continuing power and water outages, and a catastrophic week with wildfires ravaging the country and exposing the ruling class, the government met on Thursday and agreed to impose new taxes on the people, including a tax on Whatsapp calls. [1]

While the uprising is not merely caused by the Whatsapp tax specifically, the newly agreed upon taxes (later reversed following street pressure) were perceived by most Lebanese as a 'vulgar' reflection of the government's total neglect of people's hardship and its priority to protect the interests of the ruling upper class at the expense of the majority of the population.

Not completely unexpected, mass protests have ravaged the country. While Lebanon has witnessed in its recent history similar massive "street explosions" against the ruling class (such as in 2015), the Lebanese 'October Revolution' of 2019 marks an important turning point in the history of contentious politics in the post-civil war era. After almost three decades of neoliberal policies that resulted in the deepening of class divides, people have taken to the streets this time to clearly denounce the ruling class that stands as the guardian of neoliberalism (and its own class interests), beyond sectarian divides that are usually an effective tactic deployed by the leaders to divide the streets. This time, the revolution started with the poorer classes of unemployed or underemployed - usually the backbone and constituencies of the hegemonic sectarian parties through complex networks of clientelism – turning against their 'patrons'.

Thousands of 'motorcycle riders' mobilized on Thursday evening, following the government's decision to impose new taxes, to block roads with blazing tyres and paralyze movement in the capital Beirut. The road blockades quickly spread to other regions and people started to gather in squares and roads across the country in a show of anger that clearly targeted all the rulers – for the first time, without any exception. The initial mobilizations that took the shape of a riot have – maybe surprisingly for some – gathered hundreds of thousands around them. While the protests of 2015 were led by a group of civil society organizations mainly representing the middle classes and rejecting most signs of riot or civil disobedience under the banner of protecting the protests from "infiltrators", the recent protests have started specifically with those usually (and wrongly in most cases) considered to be the "infiltrators" themselves.

Not only is the tactic of protest different from previous movements in terms of road blockades and civil disobedience, but the scope of the protest is also much wider with regions such as the Beqaa, Tripoli, Nabatiyeh, Tyre and Zouk mobilizing in huge numbers, and the lexicon of the chants is clearly different with curse words and swearing at politicians forming the bulk of the slogans! The resonance of such "osé" chants with the wide majority of protesters in the squares, many of whom would have rejected and denounced such slogans a few years ago, speaks of an extreme level of anger that can challenge authority and morality at once (even amongst the middle classes!). These differences in the current movement compared to previous ones are not details, they reflect deeper social transformations that have reached an extreme and that have been reflected in the radicalization of the movement. The mobilizations of the past few days have shown the start of the emergence of a new class-based alliance between the unemployed, underemployed, working classes and middle classes against the ruling oligarchy. This is a breakthrough.

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Despite attempts by the regime to play the usual card of talking about “infiltrators” and the presence of “fifth columns” (which in most cases is no other than the regime itself), it is impressive how little resonance this discourse has had on protesters so far. This is not to say that such a discourse has been completely eliminated and such scenarios have been ruled out, but rather to highlight the importance of the newly emerging class-based awareness that is focused on targeting the ruling elites rather than dividing itself. If this can be sustained and organized in the coming weeks, this will probably mark the most important turning point in Lebanon's post-war history of contention.

While the hopes are high and the scenes from the streets are heartwarming, three main points are important for the movement to take into account in order to push this breakthrough forward:

1. It is crucial to organize. This has already started and it is taking various shapes and forms, however the movement still needs to develop its organization without shying away from having a leadership. Leaderless movements are unsustainable and can rarely propose clear alternatives. They also are not accurately ‘leaderless’. Usually, in such cases, an unannounced leadership stays behind the scenes and coordinates the movement, however it remains unaccountable. Usually, this ‘unannounced leadership’ is the most pre-organized groups and the ones that have the most financial means to cover the costs of sound systems, transportation, distribution of food and water, etc. However, a movement leadership does not need to be extremely hierarchical and traditional or completely horizontal and unapparent. The emergence of a trustworthy leadership that can represent big sections of the protesters, coordinate at the regional levels and highlight the priorities of the transitional period is crucial to sustain the movement beyond the street mobilization of the first weeks.

Organization is also important beyond the immediacy of the protests now. It is time for the opposition in Lebanon to perceive itself as such and for different groups to organize based on their social and economic interests and coordinate together (which the ruling oligarchy excels at!). It is in times of such street explosions that we lament the lack of previous organization and we feel the need for having our networks better activated and expanded. Reactivating and building new unions, organizing in our workplaces, organizing as unemployed, organizing as women, organizing in our neighborhoods, organizing as students, etc. are all important forms of organizing that can form the scaffolder of the coming period. Some forms of such organization, such as feminist groups and student groups, already exist and are amongst the most beautiful aspects of this uprising. More of this is needed, and more coordination is crucial amongst the various groups and amongst the different regions of the country.

2. Raising clear demands that are revolutionary enough but specific enough. There are many demands in the streets, primarily socio-economic of course, but the movement has not developed a clear set of demands that can shape a desirable and convincing alternative. This is not a call for “pragmatism”, but rather a call for progressive demands to take over some of the populist demands that have become widespread in the streets. The calls by many protesters for an army takeover is amongst the most dangerous demands going around. It is unfortunate that we still need to write those lines in 2019 after all that we have seen in the Arab region in terms of the consequences of army intervention in uprisings. It is also ridiculous to talk of an army take over or a military rule in a country where the current president (Michel Aoun) is an ex-army commander and the current army commander (Joseph Aoun) is a (far) relative and (unvocal) supporter of the president.

This is not to mention that it was specifically the Lebanese army (not only the security forces) that unleashed its most violent repression against the protesters on Friday evening. How can we trust an army that is defending the ruling class and using barbaric violence against protesters? A different, yet related, type of populism widespread in the streets is the prevalence of Lebanese nationalism obvious in the flags, the repetition of the national anthem (often accompanied with the ‘nazi salute’), and the nationalist songs from 2005 that are played most day long from the loud speakers of some groups, making the more radical and progressive voices less heard. Sure, it is great for the Lebanese people to surpass sectarian divides, but Lebanese nationalism is not necessarily the opposite of sectarianism, nor is it usually a progressive sign. It is exactly this same nationalist discourse that justifies racism against Syrian or Palestinian refugees – a discourse shaped and deployed by the very ruling elites people are

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protesting against (the champion of this racist and nationalist discourse being the most cited name in the chants of protesters: Minister Gebran Bassil). This is a slippery slope that we should not fall into. What mobilized people in their millions is not the lack of unity or patriotism, it is rather the lack of justice and socio-economic rights.

Let's stay focused on that since this is the only common denominator amongst the 1.2 million who mobilized so far. Such socio-economic demands can include (1) immediately cutting off the salaries of the current and past presidents, MPs, ministers, and first rank officers, (2) demanding the Lebanese banks to wave the national debt that has eaten up most of the country's budget in the past three decades, (3) imposing progressive taxation, (4) immediately solving the cuts in electricity and water (at the expense of the cartels of private companies of generators and water suppliers), (4) demanding a sustainable and ecological solution for waste management, etc. Other demands at the regional levels can emerge related to the specificity of each region in the country. At the political level, some protesters are demanding the resignation of the government and others are demanding the resignation of the president, while many are demanding both at once. While I personally am not convinced that resignations will lead to actual change (it is a cosmetic act that can give the impression of a victory in the streets while the regime reproduces itself), it is important for demands of resignation to be accompanied with demands for trials and prosecutions.

We do not want the ruling class to resign and be able to get away with its crimes, we want justice! The judges of Lebanon (many of whom have historically played a crucial role in protecting the ruling class) have to be held accountable and pressured to play their role. An important statement was issued on Friday by the Lebanese Judges' Association siding with the people against the ruling class. This should be taken seriously and acted upon. [2]

3. The risk of containment and cooptation is not yet null. While it is true that this uprising is spectacular in how the constituencies of political parties have turned against their own leaders, the risks of containment and cooptation are still there (even if less likely than previously). The ruling class has in all its figures adopted the same discourse so far in addressing the protesters: "you are right", "we understand you", "we feel you", but "beware"! Even the performative move of the Lebanese Forces ministers to hand in their resignation to the Prime Minister does not really speak any different language. They have all acknowledged being in the wrong, and each is trying to contain its street in its own way.

The 72 hours ultimatum that the Prime Minister gave himself (ironically!) kicked off with heavy repression in the streets and hundreds of arrests. [3] This was followed the next day with a violent attack in the southern city of Tyre on peaceful protesters by the militiamen of the Amal party followers. Such is the face of the promised changes to come after the 72 hours ultimatum. The hope of the ruling class to kill the movement with violence is an old tactic. This violence can take the shape of direct security forces or army violence and arrests, or it can be indirect state violence through its 'thugs' and 'militiamen' (as also seen with the 'baltagia' in Egypt or Syria). While this might not work fully this time, the regime usually uses violence hand-in-hand with its other tool of containment: clientelist networks. Sectarian leaders don't only threaten people in their jobs and social provisions, but they also threaten to remove their protection and go after the ones that oppose them (especially if they remain in power, as in 2015!). The dismantling of the clientelistic networks can only fully happen with the dismantling of the whole regime of sectarian consociationalism mixed with neoliberalism.

The revolution has already paid a high price with at least 6 martyrs and hundreds of injured in the past three days. Lebanon has a golden opportunity for the formation of an alternative, we should not let the ruling class reproduce itself again. Lebanon's October revolution must go on!

[1] <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2019/10/07/How-the-Lebanese-pound-peg-began-to-crack-under-pressure-.html>=>
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[2]

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[3] <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Oct-19/493851-hariri-drops-gauntlet-as-protests-rage.ashx>.