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Lebanon

Lebanon's neoliberal and confessional political system in question

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On 4 August a new tragedy struck Lebanon. An explosion of unprecedented magnitude in the country's history left more than 180 dead (Lebanese, Syrians and other nationalities), more than 7,000 injured and 300,000 homeless. It is the entire neoliberal and denominational political system that is called into question.

The material damage amounts to billions of dollars - an estimate of 15 billion has been put forward by the authorities. This tragedy comes in addition to an already catastrophic socio-economic situation after the eruption of the economic crisis in October 2019 and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The proportion of Lebanese living below the poverty line exceeded 50 per cent after the Covid-19 crisis, while the unemployment rate reached 35 per cent.

The sources of this new drama in Lebanon are to be found in the neoliberal and denominational political system and the domination exercised by the different fractions of the dominant classes that compose it.

All the dominant political parties have denied having any knowledge of the presence of ammonium nitrate in the port hangar which caused the fatal explosion of August 4, 2020. However, the entire structure of the port, its management as well as the Customs Authority, which manages the port jointly with the Beirut Port Authority, are in the hands of personalities affiliated with the dominant actors of the Lebanese political system.

"Support" against austerity

A large number of heads of state have officially given their support to the Lebanese people. But as in any crisis, states and international monetary institutions seize these moments as opportunities to promote and deepen the neoliberal dynamic, such as the extension of the market economy into various sectors hitherto nationalized. Emmanuel Macron, during his highly mediatised visit to Lebanon for a few hours after the tragedy, called for "reforms", together with the director of the IMF, Kristalina Georgieva.

Their implementation was made a prerequisite for any release of financial aid, both by the IMF - which Lebanon officially requested in May - and by all of its international backers, particularly the participants in the conference in Paris in April 2018 who set aside more than \$11 billion in loans and grants for Lebanon. In return for these billions of dollars, the Lebanese government must commit to developing public-private partnerships, reducing the level of debt and enacting austerity measures.

Popular solidarity and protest

Following the tragedy, solidarity between the Lebanese and migrant popular classes (Syrians, Palestinians and those from sub-Saharan African countries) manifested itself, to provide assistance to people who had suffered the destruction of their homes and to clear the streets of debris.

During the weekend of August 8 and 9, massive demonstrations took place in Beirut to demand that those responsible for the tragedy face prosecution and to overthrow all the parties in power without exception.

The resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab on August 10 under popular pressure did not calm the protest

movement, which continues to mobilize, even with declining intensity. On August 14, the main Lebanese political forces in Parliament ratified the state of emergency, which had been declared on August 5. The Lebanese army can therefore make arrests without having recourse to the courts, limit the freedom of the press and the media, prohibit gatherings, etc. Ending popular protests is indeed a priority for the dominant political parties.

An alternative to build

The appointment of a new Prime Minister endorsed by all denominational and bourgeois political forces is situated within the perspective of maintaining the system as it is and without change. Calling for a new government of national unity bringing together all bourgeois denominational forces, as French President Emmanuel Macron has done, are helping to maintain the status quo.

The demands of the protest movement for justice for the explosion of 4 August come in addition to those raised since October 2019 for social justice and the redistribution of the country's wealth. These demands cannot be separated from opposition to the denominational political system, which protects the privileges of the economic and political elites. The construction of a credible and inclusive mass political alternative, non-denominational and social, defending the interests of all popular classes, remains a necessity.

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