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Lebanon

A persistent political and economic crisis in Lebanon

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The new government received the blessing of France and Iran, among others, who were both active and involved in the negotiations for its formation. The first foreign trip of the newly appointed Prime Minister was therefore to French President Macron in Paris. The main tasks of this new government are to organise new elections, to be held at the end of March 2022, and to implement “economic reforms”, i.e. new rounds of privatization and austerity measures.

Almost two years after the outbreak of the uprising, the ruling parties' domination over large sectors of society is still firmly in place, while they have extended some forms of services to their popular base in a context of continued weakening of the state and deepening economic crisis.

Economic and social crisis in the country

At the same time, the socio-economic situation in the country has continued to deteriorate in all respects. The poverty rate has increased dramatically from 25 per cent in 2019 to 74 per cent in 2021. Lebanon has one of the highest inflation rates in the world in 2021, with a 137.8 per cent increase in the consumer price index between August 2020 and August 2021, and the devaluation of the Lebanese pound by 90 per cent since the crisis began in October 2019.

Foreign workers subject to the kafala system, which deprives them of their basic civil and human rights, have also seen their conditions deteriorate significantly. The majority of these workers are women from African and South East Asian countries. Similarly, Syrian refugees continue to suffer severe impoverishment and various forms of abuse. Almost 91% of them live on less than \$3.80 a day.

Aftermath of the 2020 explosion and rising political tensions

The impunity of the neoliberal sectarian political elites regarding the criminal explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020 continues to this day. The investigation into the case has been repeatedly suspended following manoeuvres by the ruling class to stop it, and has ultimately failed to incriminate any of the ministers responsible.

In addition, multiple potential witnesses were murdered. This impunity of the sectarian neoliberal ruling elite allows for other similar criminal disasters. In August 2021, another criminal explosion occurred in the north of the country, in the village of Tleil in Akkar, killing around 30 people.

At the same time, Hezbollah stepped up its attacks against the judge in charge of the investigation, Tareq Bitar, accusing him of politicizing the case and of being instrumentalized by the United States. On 14 October, a gathering of several hundred supporters of Hezbollah and parliamentary speaker Nabih Berry's Amal movement quickly turned into a guerrilla war, turning parts of the capital into war zones. The clashes left seven people dead, most of them members of or close to the Hezbollah and Amal camps. There are strong suspicions that members of the Lebanese Forces (LF) or their supporters opened fire on Amal and Hezbollah demonstrators.

This polarization of the political field and the rise of sectarian tensions in the country further weaken the capacity of the popular classes to get out of this deadly and reactionary head-to-head.

Where is the popular resistance?

The protest movement has weakened considerably since October 2019, although it has never completely died out despite state repression, the financial crisis and the pandemic.

The continued absence of non-sectarian mass organizations and parties rooted in the country's working classes remains the main problem of the protest movement. They do not yet exist and this weakens the capacity of the movement to organize itself into a real social and political challenge to the confessional neoliberal parties and their system. The different 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 channelling demands and organizing protesters across the country.

In this political context, marked by a deep economic crisis and the absence of a viable political alternative, the confessional parties will be able to mobilize their confessional base and maintain their hegemony in the next elections, which will take place in March 2022.

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