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Lebanon

# **“The People Want the Fall of the Regime”**

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV537 - October 2019 -

Publication date: Friday 25 October 2019

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**The streets of Lebanon are ringing with protest chants as the country witnesses its largest popular movement in decades. Their target: a political and economic system that impoverishes the many while enriching the few.**

Over the last week, Lebanon has been rocked by a massive protest movement, larger than any the country has seen in decades.

The demonstrations erupted after the government announced it would implement new taxes, including on instant messaging applications like What's App. Against the backdrop of austerity measures and an ever-deepening socio-economic crisis, workers and others without wealth decided enough was enough.

They surged into the streets, denouncing the very foundations of the political and economic system. In their eyes, all of the major parties are implicated in their misery.

## **Against Social Injustice and Sectarianism**

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.

And as for the top of society? 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.

Lebanon's political and economic rot has triggered some protests in recent years: in early 2011, during the Arab Spring; in 2012 and 2014, over labor conditions; and in the summer of 2015, over sanitation. But the scale and breadth of the current demonstrations far outstrips previous ones. Protests have exploded not just in the capital of Beirut, but across the country: Tripoli, Nabatiyeh, Tyr, Baalbeck, Zouk. On Sunday, an estimated 1.2 million people turned out in Beirut, and a bit more than 2 million total demonstrated throughout the country — this in a nation of 6 million.

The social composition of the movement also distinguishes 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. As the scholar and activist Rima Majed writes, “The mobilizations of the past few days have shown 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.”

The enormous demonstrations in the northern city of Tripoli and the surrounding region speak to Majed's point. North Lebanon represents 20.7 percent of the country's inhabitants, but 46 percent of the extremely poor and 38 percent of the poor. Health care is substandard, while dropout rates, unemployment, and female illiteracy are among the highest in the country. No large-scale development project has occurred since the 1990s.

Yet Tripoli's protests have been described as the “carnival of the revolution,” with a festive atmosphere and DJs playing in the city's main square to tens of thousands of protesters. Earlier today, representatives from doctors, engineers, and lawyers' professional unions published a joint statement declaring their support for the city's protest movement.

A final distinguishing characteristic is the movement's actively non-sectarian cast. Signs and messages of solidarity between regions and across religious sects have multiplied since the protests' emergence — for example, between the Tripoli neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh (majority Alawite) and Jabal Mohsen (majority Sunni), where armed conflicts raged in recent years; and between Sunni-dominated Tripoli and southern, Shi'a-majority cities like Nabathieh and Tyr. Demonstrators are not only denouncing neoliberal economic policies and corruption, but the whole sectarian and pro-business regime. As one of the main slogans of the popular movement puts it, “Everyone means everyone.”

Protesters are now calling for general strikes, and certain sectors have already been affected. Demonstrators have blockaded roads to grind economic activity to a halt, and some schools, universities, private businesses, and banks have closed.

Earlier today, President Michel Aoun declared he was ready for a dialogue with protesters to “help save the country from collapse” and suggested a government reshuffle was possible.

## The Ruling Class Response

Political representation in Lebanon is organized along sectarian lines at the highest echelons of the state. The president is required to be Maronite, the prime minister Sunni, and the president of the chamber of deputies Shia. Lebanon's sectarian system (like sectarianism more generally) is one of the main instruments used by the ruling parties to strengthen their control over the popular classes, keeping them subordinated to their sectarian leaders.

In the past, ruling elites have been able to quash movements through repression or by playing up sectarian divisions. This time around, the ruling parties have responded with small carrots and a big stick.

Following the first night of protests, the government cancelled some of the taxes it had proposed. When the mobilizations continued to blossom, Prime Minister Saad Hariri gave his governmental rivals a seventy-two-hour ultimatum to back his preferred reforms and on Monday, announced his 2020 budget plan: no new taxes, the symbolic halving of ministers and lawmakers' salaries, cost-cutting steps like the merging or abolishment of some public institutions, and the privatization of the state-run power sector.

These measures, supported by all the main parties, will not improve the lives of ordinary people, as Hariri has claimed. They are largely the fulfillment of demands by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprises (CEDRE) agreement, which Lebanon signed in Paris in April 2018. In exchange for about \$11 billion in loans and aid, the government agreed to pursue public-private partnerships, bring down debt levels, and enact austerity measures.

In addition to this suite of reforms, the ruling parties have launched a volley of attacks both verbal (accusing some sectors of the movement of being “infiltrators” or representing “fifth columns” serving foreign interests) and physical (meting out severe repression against protesters). Amnesty International has decried the country’s security forces for its violent attacks on peaceful protests in Beirut: firing huge amounts of tear gas into crowds, chasing down protesters at gunpoint and beating them. In the southern city of Nabathieh, protesters have been assaulted by partisans and municipal employees belonging to Amal and Hezbollah, two Shi’a political parties.

All told, hundreds of protesters have been injured, and six have been killed since demonstrations broke out last week.

## Expectations and Challenges

While on the upswing, Lebanon’s protest movement faces considerable organizational challenges if it is win progressive reforms. The main one is the lack of popular institutions that can channel demands, organize protesters across sectarian and geographical differences, and win out over more conservative elements, which are already calling for a technocratic government or military rule.

The weakness of working-class institutions is a longstanding problem. Sectarian parties have actively tried to weaken the labor movement since the 1990s, forming separate federations and trade unions in a number of sectors in order to win significant power in the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). As a result, the CGTL has been unable to mobilize workers despite intensifying neoliberal policies. They are conspicuously absent in the current protest movement.

The Union Coordination Committee (UCC), the leading actor in the labor protests between 2011 and 2014, has been similarly hamstrung. At the UCC’s January 2015 election, the sectarian parties united against the combative trade unionist Hanna Gharib, who only managed to draw support from independents and the Lebanese Communist Party. Ever since the election, the UCC’s influence has waned.

What workers need is a democratic and independent trade union movement, one that is autonomous from sectarian political parties and which incorporates foreign workers. Alternative structures of representation and organization are absolutely crucial to challenging the domination of the sectarian and bourgeois ruling parties.

One promising sign: organized feminists and students have joined the protests and intervened in coordinated ways across the country. Women in particular have participated in massive numbers, with feminists pushing for women’s rights and equality within the movement.

Against the Ruling Elite

The demands of the protest movement for social justice and economic redistribution cannot be separated from their opposition to the sectarian political system, which protects the privileges of the wealthy and powerful. The Lebanese ruling sectarian parties and different fractions of the bourgeoisie have exploited privatization schemes and control of ministries to build and strengthen their network of patronage, nepotism, and corruption, while the majority of Lebanon’s population, both foreign and native-born, suffer poverty and indignity.

In taking to the streets en masse, Lebanon’s protesters have pushed their country into the pantheon of regional popular uprisings that began in late 2010 and continue to today, as the events in Sudan, Algeria, and Iraq can attest. Their demand is as unambiguous as it is ambitious: “the people want the fall of the regime.”

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Republished from [Jacobin](#), 24 October 2019.

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