

2019 Lebanese Revolution

ONE MONTH TOWARDS CHANGE

MONTH I :
17 October **17** November



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Arab NGO Network for Development
شبكة المنظمات العربية غير الحكومية للتنمية



Wicked Politics and Shaken Socio-Economy

Since 17 October 2019, Lebanon has been witnessing a massive wave of unprecedented nationwide protests, which are deemed to mark a new era in its history. These protests are motivated by the direct repercussions of the economic and monetary crisis on the Lebanese population, but are indeed rooted in a structurally flawed economic system and wicked political practices and corruption embraced by the successive governments for decades. The protests are widespread across the country and remain non-sectarian, marking the biggest postwar civil movement, as the Lebanese people overcome their religious and political divergences and join forces in an attempt to achieve real change. This change was long awaited by the Lebanese, and the civil society specifically that has been for years trying to promote partnerships and engage in policy making at different levels, despite the lack of serious and effective channels.

The few months to a year before the eruption of the revolution saw a looming economic crisis with the increase in government debt, and questionable monetary and financial engineering coupled with a decrease in GDP growth, as well as a rise in unemployment (approximately 16% and more than 45% among youth) and poverty rates and prices of essential commodities.

Following the late adoption of the 2019 budget this past July, the negotiations of the 2020 budget were being finalized in October with a clear aim to increase the state revenue at any cost, and hopelessly reduce the enormous deficit (11%) and escape the crisis. As such, the cabinet meeting held on 17 October suggested a new set of austerity measures, and more severely new indirect taxation without envisioning the anger of the Lebanese people and the massive protests about to invade the country on that same day.

Since the first days of the uprisings, the political parties and different regime components were threatened by the imminent change protestors were calling for, which would jeopardize the power they have rooted for decades in the country. As a result, key politicians have addressed the public on many occasions, with desperate efforts to mitigate the risk the change of government structure would have, under the pretext of avoiding and alleviating the burden of the economic and financial crises. These speeches were only addressed to specific groups in the country, and have unfortunately only aimed at retaining popularity and support among their followers.



What the politicians failed to realize is that for once, protestors have shared a clear vision with clear demands of the political and economic future systems they want to achieve: government resignation, formation of a new one that comprises independent people from the ruling parties, and holding democratic parliamentary elections based on a new democratic electoral law. As such, the decentralized revolution across Lebanon showed zero intention to negotiate these demands, and adopted plenty of escalation measures to get a step closer towards the goals. As a result, Prime Minister Saad Hariri addressed the public on the third day of the revolution and asked for 72h, which ended with an objectionable list of planned reforms, to be followed and adopted first thing by the government, in a desperate move to halt the protests that nonetheless kept rising across the country. The escalation of the uprisings including general strikes and roadblocks finally led to the resignation of the government on the 12th day of the revolution, marking a small win and the first step towards greater victory. Since 29 October, Lebanon has been in a government void, with alleged efforts by the President to name a new Prime Minister and form a government that could meet the people's demands. On the contrary, their practices for the past three weeks have marked a breach in the Constitution by clearly aiming to form the government before holding the mandatory parliamentary consultations to name a Prime Minister.

Moreover, the first two weeks of the revolution were heightened by general strikes that halted the operation of the majority of companies and institutions, including schools, universities and banks that also remained often interrupted during the second

half of the month. The closure of the banks especially has had major repercussions on the daily lives, and is believed to intensify the economic and financial crises, which have further regressed following the international downgrades of Lebanon's credit assessment. As a result, the commercial banks have adopted random restrictive regulations including limits on daily/ weekly withdrawals, reduction of the credit cards limits, stopping the cashing of checks, and more worryingly halting all outgoing transactions unless for emergency cases. Despite the assurances made by the governor of the "Banque du Liban" and the repulses he made on possible capital controls or haircuts on high bank deposits (unreasonably made as a result of the financial engineering and Ponzi Scheme), commercial banks continued to arbitrarily impose new restrictions interpreted as capital controls, with the clear aim to avoid a bank-run and contain the remaining dollars in the country. And despite all the efforts and void assurances made to the public, Lebanon is by no doubt in the middle of an economic recession and probably a currency crisis too, that will amplify inflation rate and thus poverty. These represent the direct consequences of the rentier economy and liberal macroeconomic policies the country has openly adopted since the 1990s, and will definitely constitute the fuel to the revolution that shall not stop before changing the entire economic and political systems.





Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution provides “The freedom to express one’s opinion orally or in writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association shall be guaranteed within the limits established by law”.

Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides “The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”.

Violations and Threats against Protestors

The freedom to participate to peaceful assembly is an inalienable right, and Lebanon has a positive obligation to protect and facilitate the right to freedom of assembly, rather than impose unnecessary or disproportionate limits on it. Being state party to International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and within the Lebanese Constitution, Lebanon enshrines the right and enjoyment of this freedom.

However, despite the guarantees of freedom of expression, Article 384 of the penal code punishes with imprisonment individuals from six months to two years for insulting the president, flag, or national emblem, which obviously silences any criticism or opposition.

Since the beginning of the protests in Lebanon, several human rights violations occurred against protesters, including the use of excessive force, tear gas, arbitrary detention and arrests:

- **On 12 November:** second martyr of the revolution, Alaa Abou Fakher, was shot dead in the coastal town of Khalde, south of Beirut while peacefully protesting and blocking the roads.
- **On 13 November:** one activist was arbitrarily arrested by security forces during a peaceful protest in front of the presidential palace in Baabda, Lebanon, for charges related to freedom of expression. He was released the following day, yet showed marks of physical abuse and torture.
- **Between 17 October and 30 October:** 1702 protesters injured at protest areas and 282 injured and transported to hospitals as reported by the Lebanese Red Cross.
- **Between 17 October and 4 November:** Lebanese authorities detained around 300 protesters, including 12 minors at least in Beirut and Tyre according to the Lawyers’ Committee for the Defense of Protesters. Around 76 were subjected to violence and torture by either security forces and supporters of political parties. The committee set a hotline to support protesters in case of arrest and organized awareness-raising meetings for lawyers regarding the rights of protesters.
- **On 18 October:** use of excessive and unnecessary force against protesters, The Internal Security Force’s riot police fired tear gas at thousands of largely peaceful protesters, including children, in downtown Beirut. At least 64 patients had been admitted that evening due to tear gas inhalation.
- **On 18 October:** 70 protesters were arrested for “acts of vandalism and looting” in downtown Beirut.
- **On 19 October:** the first martyr of the revolution: Hussein Al-Attar was shot while protesting and blocking roads on the airport road.
- **On 26 October:** in the city of Beddawi in north Lebanon, military forces used rubber bullets injuring protesters, eight reported wounded and two in critical condition.
- **On 29 October:** dozens of counter-demonstrators attacked protesters in Beirut, destroying tents and tearing down banners.



Civil Society Organizations' Awareness

CSOs played an important role in the revolution benefiting from their accumulated knowledge, communication skills and organizational capacities. Most of those organizations were participating since day one in the protests and their role went beyond protesting. CSOs were leading in coordinating the protests and organizing daily discussions in the different squares in Beirut and the regions that address politics, law, socio-economic policies and human rights. The participation in the discussions has been increasing and involving different sectors of the society including youth, women, private sector, businesses, academics, and students. Those discussions address peoples' concerns and ensure the availability of solutions and alternatives. Moreover, specialized organizations were very prompt in reacting to the steps taken by the political parties in power, as follows:

- The prime minister proposed an economic reform paper during the first week of protests as a rescue measure for the social and economic crises the country is going through. CSOs were quick in analyzing and providing a detailed critical reading of the paper that seems to be unrealistic and preserves the usual approaches to the financial and economic fields.
- The government resigned on 29 October, and voices were echoing a political void in the country that may lead to unrest. CSOs were also quick in clarifying the constitutional steps that follow the resignation of the government, emphasizing on the ways to escape the political void. They proposed that the parliament forms a temporary government with exceptional legislative mandate that could play two major

roles: the first to address the urgent economic issues and the second to a draft a new non-confessional election law. The implementation of this roadmap could ensure a peaceful and constitutional transition in the country.

- The parliament presented a set of laws that were promoted as a "legislative revolution" including the amnesty law. CSOs stood against this law in particular, and critically criticized every detail of it and highlighting how this law can contribute to impunity and instability on the long term. As a result of this advocacy, the parliament session scheduled for 12 November was postponed.

Professionals and Labors Grouping

The Lebanese political system has long contributed to the regression of the role of the syndicates and the professional associations in the country. The wide political intervention and control over those bodies shifted their genuine role from defending workers and professional rights to stabilizing the political and social status-co in the country. This situation became clearer during the first days of the protests, when people felt the absence of those bodies. As a result, independent professionals as well as employees' groups started to take a leading role to fill this gap. A group of professional people including university professors, journalists, engineers and doctors started to organize themselves to play an important role in coordinating the movements and inviting for protests in front of the General Confederation

of Lebanese Workers. This group also contributed to the socio-economic discussions that were organized in the squares and provided accurate information and knowledge that are essential for proposing policy alternatives and solutions. A club of judges was established and registered in 2019 played an important role in the revolution through different positions and statements it has adopted, stressing on the importance of the independence of the judiciary and keenly analyzing the laws proposed by the Lebanese parliament. The journalists also felt the absence of their association, and thus called upon each other to form an alternative association that could play a role in defending the rights and freedoms of journalists.

Concerning the lawyers, the Beirut Bar Association played a regressive role in defending the detainees amongst the protestors, and hence a group of independent lawyers took the initiative to defend those detainees. More importantly, this group has provided support and legal and constitutional knowledge that enrich the discussions happening in different squares across the country, and clarified the legal dimensions and measures that should be adopted. The efforts of the independent lawyers culminated in the results of the elections of the Beirut Bar Association members on 17 November, where for the first time, a politically independent lawyer taking active part in the revolution was elected as president of the Association. All of these efforts are combined with some of the coordination's efforts to elaborate alternative economic and fiscal policies, which would serve for the next phase after the revolution.





The Women the Leaders

While women in Lebanon have been at the forefront during every important political moment in the country, they were particularly active during the October Revolution. Women slogans and demands were very clear and evident: the right to give citizenship to their families, a civil personal status law, protection from violence, etc. Women have organized themselves in groups, or participated individually, to form human shields at the forefront of protests to prevent violence, lead the marches, and host discussions on women issues.

Feminist and women marches were held outside Beirut, in North and South Lebanon particularly, constituting a bold action that was not very common prior to the revolution. Feminists were also able to critically engage with slogans of the revolution, and to place their discourses on the table. They were able to draw attention to many patriarchal connotations in the slogans, even in the national anthem. In addition to being active alongside men, and sometimes alone, in closing roads and occupying the squares and public facilities, women cooked meals and offered them to the protesters and sitters to support them, and initiated cleaning and recycling campaigns on a regular basis.

The Youth the Backbone

The October Revolution has witnessed a very active participation of young people and youth groups that formed the backbone of the protests as they have been eager for years to take part in the decision making and the political life. In Lebanon, youth below the age of 21 are not eligible for voting during the parliamentary and municipal elections, and yet they found a space in this revolution to participate and make their voices heard. As such, young

voices and concerns were loud during the protests, particularly voiced against unemployment, immigration and brain drain, while also suggesting bold demands such as the downfall of the regime and all the political leaders without exception and the establishment of a secular system that promotes social justice and gender equality.

The revolution has been also an opportunity to revive the student movement in Lebanon. Despite all the efforts made prior to the revolution to form a nation-wide student movement, with the absence of a national student union, the student movement was still fragmented and weak. However, after 17 October, student clubs in private universities such as the American University of Beirut, Notre-Dame University, Université Saint-Joseph, participated heavily in the protests in and off campus, forming marches from universities to main protest squares, and even setting their own tents in downtown Beirut. Other private universities such as Lebanese American University and Lebanese International University witnessed protests on and around campus. The Lebanese University (LU), Lebanon's national university, witnessed the biggest student protests. The LU Student Coalition was particularly active in the revolution, from setting a tent for protesters in Riad Al-Solh square, downtown Beirut, to hosting various discussions, joining efforts with other student clubs and leftist groups. Younger school students also had their position and say of the revolution. Along with university students' groups, they took a big part in the civil disobedience

and the general strikes they were called for. Students closed their schools and universities, and protested in front of the Ministry of Education and other public administrations for many days. The 6 of November marked the "Students' Day" whereby students all across Lebanon were revolting for a better future. An icon banner raised by one of the students says it all: "On this day I won't be learning history, I will be writing it".


The Arab NGO Network for Development works in 12 Arab countries, with 9 national networks (with an extended membership of 250 CSOs from different backgrounds) and 23 NGO members.

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