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Lebanon

Movement against neoliberalism and confessionalism grows

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Lebanon is currently seeing mobilizations at a level not seen for decades, starting from 17 October 2019 following the government's announcement of new taxes, notably on the WhatsApp instant messaging application and against a backdrop of an ever deeper economic crisis. The popular protest quickly spread to all the cities of the country, causing the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri on 29 October 2019. The demonstrators oppose the government's neoliberal economic policies, austerity measures and corruption, but are also challenging the entire Lebanese confessional system. All the confessional political parties which compose it and dominate political life are targeted.

Since the end of the 2000s, Lebanon has been shaped by the growing divides resulting from the implementation of neoliberal reforms. Twenty-eight per cent of the population lives in poverty, earning less than \$4 a day. The incomes of the poorest households stagnated or fell by 25-30% between 2010 and 2016. Unemployment is also high: only a third of the working-age population has a job, while among young people aged 15-24, the unemployment rate is on average 23.3% (35.7% for young graduates). Between 40 and 50% of Lebanese residents do not have access to the National Social Security Fund or any other public social assistance. The percentage of informal workers, that is, those who have no health insurance, is around 55%. Precarious foreign workers, whose total number is estimated at just over a million, or around 20% of the population, also have no social protection. According to a study by the Central Statistics Administration, half of daily workers and more than a third of farmers in the country live below the poverty line. The richest 10% receive 56% of the national income. The wealthiest 1% alone, just over 37,000 people, receive 23% of income.

This situation has led to many demonstrations in the past: at the beginning of 2011, with a first movement for the abolition of the confessional system; between 2011 and 2014, with large rallies and strikes to protest against working conditions and for wage increases; and in the summer of 2015, with the popular movement "Vous puez", which started as part of a garbage management crisis and which also led to a questioning of the confessional system and neoliberal policies as a whole.

The popular movement started in October 2019 challenges the system even more radically. It is explicitly denounced (all parties combined) as responsible for the deterioration of socio-economic conditions. Confessionalism must be understood as a tool of the ruling parties - and therefore of the Lebanese political elites - to intervene ideologically in the class struggle, strengthen their control over the popular classes and keep them in a position of subordination to their confessional leaders. In the past, protest movements have been kept in check or crushed not only by repression but also by playing on community divisions.

While the majority of the population sank into poverty, the dominant denominational parties and the various groups of the economic elite took advantage of the privatization processes, neoliberal policies and the control of government ministries to develop powerful networks of patronage, nepotism and corruption. This approach recognizes confessionalism as a product of modern times rather than an alleged cultural tradition.

By this yardstick, the non-denominational nature of the current movement takes on its full dimension. It is significant that in terms of its social composition, the October 2019 uprising differs from previous mobilizations in that it is much more rooted in the popular and waged worker classes than the mobilizations of 2011 and 2015, in which the liberal middle classes had played a more important role. The current movement has also spread to all regions of Lebanon and has not been limited to Beirut. Protests have exploded across the country: Tripoli, Nabatiyeh, Tyr, Baalbek, Zouk, Saida, Jal al-Dib and other cities. Its scope is significant: as one of the flagship slogans of the popular movement says "All means all", challenging neoliberal economic policies and corruption means denouncing all the

representatives of the faith-based system. Calls and messages of solidarity between the regions and the different religious denominations have multiplied since the protests began, for example between the districts of Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli (majority Alawite) and Jabal Mohsen (majority Sunni), where armed conflicts have been numerous in recent years.

In this sense, the demands of the protest movement for social justice and economic redistribution cannot be dissociated from their opposition to the sectarian political system. These cross-sectarian and socio-economic mobilizations pose a potential threat to all representatives of the Lebanese political elite.

Continuation since October 2019

The popular protest movement has continued since 17 October. It has widened to other causes, feminist, ecological, socio-economic (the question of foreign workers and so on).

The demonstrators have carried out targeted actions in front of public institutions, denouncing their corruption. Among them, the Banque du Liban, private banks, and institutions linked to telephone services and the management of the electricity system such as Electricité du Liban (EDL) and Ogero. Other places have seen demonstrations like the Zaytouna Bay port in Beirut and the site under construction of the Eden Bay hotel complex, which are symbols of the privatization of maritime properties. In the North, actions have targeted poor waste management. Likewise, civil disobedience campaigns have been launched, calling on people not to pay electricity bills to the EDL to denounce the sector's inability to provide continuous electricity supply, or to no longer repay bank loans to challenge the restrictions imposed by the banking sector while managers and businessmen were able to transfer billions of dollars to Swiss banks from the start of the dispute.

Another campaign, made up of activists from the left, called Tamã al-Mãsarif ("Nationalization of the banks") encourages and assists savers wishing to withdraw their money from private banks and organizes political discussions on the need for a radical change in the economic policy of the country through the nationalization of the banks.

Victories and difficulties

Several significant victories have been won by the movement since the withdrawal of the taxes that had triggered it and the resignation of prime minister Saad Hariri. Among them, the court decision obliging the mobile phone companies to issue their invoices in Lebanese pounds following the complaint filed by "The Judges' Club" with the Consumer Protection Directorate of the Ministry of Economy and Trade. Melhem Khalaf, an independent candidate from the civil movement, was elected head of the bar association, while the Bekaa League candidate Ali Yaghi, an independent supported by the popular movement, won the elections to the council of the order of dentists.

The protest movement, however, faces many challenges, most notably the lack of organization and alternative representations likely to counter the dominance of the confessional parties and ruling economic groups. Furthermore, the weakness of trade union structures poses a recurring problem. Confessional parties have actively contributed to weakening the union movement since the 1990s, forming separate federations and unions in a number of sectors in order to gain dominance within the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). As a result, the CGTL was unable to mobilize workers despite the intensification of neoliberal policies and was marked by its absence from the current protest movement. The Trade Union Coordination Committee (CCS), the main actor in union demonstrations

between 2011 and 2014, has also been marginalized by similar methods.

In addition to this lack of structuring of the movement, the economic crisis continues to worsen. According to a survey, more than 220,000 workers saw their jobs temporarily or permanently eliminated between October 2019 and the end of January 2020. In parallel, the Lebanese pound has experienced a remarkable depreciation against the dollar, a consequence of the decision taken by the Banque du Liban at the end of summer to restrict the quantity of dollars on the market: the dollar was trading at around 2,000 pounds at the end of December, while its official price was still 1,507.50 pounds, a fixed rate in effect since 1997.

However, attempts to structure new independent unions have emerged, including a “Rassemblement des professionnels” modelled on the Sudanese Professionals Association, which brings together representatives from different professions (medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, engineering, law, social work, university teaching, journalism, economics and cinema) and which plays an ever greater role in the demonstrations. Some members have declared in the press that they want to rebuild trades unionism independent of the confessional and neoliberal parties. The objective of this new union structure is to promote the productive sectors of the economy, to offer better working conditions to employees and to facilitate student access to the employment market. Other independent unions are being created among journalists, NGO workers and in the universities. Likewise, feminist and student organizations have also spearheaded protests and intervened in a coordinated fashion across the country. Some are also trying to organize themselves through municipalities in different regions, under the name of “Communes du 17 Octobre”, and others at the neighbourhood level.

Conclusion

The appointment of a new government in mid-December 2019 was rejected by the popular movement, as it is part of the continuity of neoliberal and sectarian policies in Lebanon. The new Lebanese government has also started a formal process to request technical assistance from the International Monetary Fund, while policy statements by new Prime Minister Diab have hinted at austerity measures, saying that some of the decisions needed to revive the economy would be “painful”. At the same time, repression against the demonstrators has continued to increase since the beginning of the year with hundreds of wounded. Confessional and neoliberal forces continue to co-opt, suppress or undermine the protest movement with a common goal of ending its initial aspirations for radical change. Despite a less intense popular protest than at its inception, the determination of the demonstrators remains. Their demand remains unambiguous but always ambitious: “The people want the regime to fall”. Internationalist solidarity!

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