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## Lebanon under fire – Protesters are taking the streets with a burning desire to overthrow the government

White, red and green waves are surging everywhere in the Land of Cedars. The Lebanese are taking the streets, brandishing the national flag as a call to defy a corrupted elite. The political class has proven itself unable to fulfill the expectations of the people. Initiated by the government's unpopular measure to tax WhatsApp calls in a country already affected by rising living costs, the general exasperation has now reached the highest level.

This unprecedented movement of frustration questions a sclerotic political system, embodied by politicians deeply engaged in their own petty rivalries, incapable of managing the severe crisis that Lebanon faces. This non-violent movement is unique in Lebanese history, overtaking the traditional sectarian cleavages that have characterised the society for years. Therefore, analysing such intense demonstrations is of crucial importance. This article aims at providing the key points necessary to understand what is going on in Lebanon.

In this perspective, the first part of the paper is dedicated to analysing the Lebanese political landscape, focusing on the reasons that might explain the state's inefficiency in meeting the expectations of the population and its subsequent frustration. The second part engages in a thorough report on the current developments of the protest and investigates the motivation of the Lebanese people. The third part considers the possible outcomes that might derive from such intense demonstrations.

## Understanding the Complexity of Lebanese Politics

In order to understand the roots of the recent protests, one must apprehend the vicissitudes of Lebanese politics derived from the power structure in this country. The 1975-1990 civil war, which caused around 250 000 casualties and displaced around 76,000 people, resulted in a deep distrust between the different religious confessions. Therefore, this event bears tremendous consequences on the Lebanese political landscape.

Fearing the re-emergence of a similar conflict, the different religious actors engaged in the post-war negotiations tried to reach an equilibrium. On the one hand, the prerogatives of the sects were maintained, allowing each community to settle its own issues by itself. While on the other hand, Lebanese national cohesion was reaffirmed through the cultivation of a common national identity. The success of such an undertaking relied on the attribution of a right of veto to the leaders of the confessions, thus encouraging

intense cooperation between the different segments of the Lebanese society. The purpose of the post-war agreement was to establish a stable democratic system through the readjustment of the previously existing confessional consociationalism mode of governance.<sup>1</sup>

However, such a compromise did not completely achieve the desired effects. As a matter of fact, the vetoes granted to the political formations on confessional basis have not contributed to stress cooperation between the communities, on the contrary, have led to a pattern of recurrent institutional paralysis.<sup>2</sup>

Paralysis are further intensified by the disproportionalities among the representative system. According to confessional consociationalism, power and resources are divided between the eighteen sects existing in Lebanon on sectarian basis. In this perspective, the number of seats in the parliament and the attribution of positions in the government are a direct function of the demographic weight of a specific group. It is however important to bear in mind that such a system does not represent the accurate repartition of the population.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it fails to take into

consideration demographic changes. For instance, Sunni and Shia groups are granted the same number of seats, while the latter's demographic is twice as numerous.<sup>4</sup> From such disproportionality, dissatisfaction

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1 Calfat, N. N. (2018). *The Frailties of Lebanese Democracy: Outcomes and Limits of the Confessional Framework*. *Contexto Internacional*, 40(2), p. 281.

2 *Idem*.

3 Faten Ghosn, Amal Khoury, *Lebanon after the Civil War: Peace or the Illusion of Peace*, *MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL*, VOLUME 65, NO. 3, SUMMER 2011, p. 383.

4 *Idem*, p. 280.

may easily arise, and vetoes are, therefore, more susceptible to be used as a response to a feeling of marginalization.

The recurrent paralysis that strike the country, as observed with the government crisis of 2005-2008 as well as the vacuum of presidency from 2014 to 2016 and the budget, energy and waste disposal crises of 2015, fuel a popular idea of state deficiency.

The distrust toward a polarized and locked political system is further intensified by the structure of the elite and the clientelist feature attached to it. Since the French Mandate, the access to power is mainly conditioned through personal affiliation to local dynasties. The renewal of the elite operates mainly within

those great families which monopolize the political field.<sup>5</sup> The dynasties appear as a trans-confessional phenomenon reaching the Druze, with the Jumblatt, the Christian, with the Gemayel, or the Sunni, through

the Hariri. The power-sharing feature of the Lebanese system require the monopoly of the political elite on the economic resources. Therefore, the leaders do not appear solely as representatives of their sects but also as the main providers for services, jobs and security within their own community.<sup>6</sup> The traditional state-citizen relationship appears more as a state-client relationship in the Lebanese context.<sup>7</sup>

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5 *Ward Vloeberghs, DYNAMIQUES DYNASTIQUES AU LIBAN : TRANSMETTRE LE POUVOIR POLITIQUE EN FAMILLE, Presses de Sciences Po | « Critique internationale » 2016/4 N° 73, p. 71-72.*

6 *Calfat, N. N. (2018). The Frailties of Lebanese Democracy: Outcomes and Limits of the Confessional Framework. Contexto Internacional, 40(2), p. 277.*

7 *Idem, p. 279.*

As a conclusion, the structure of the Lebanese political system appears as sclerotic and is entangled in its own inertia. The vetoes granted to the confessional communities contribute to recurrent institutional paralysis. Moreover, the monopoly of dynasties over economic resources generates important issues of corruption. The Lebanese sectarian power structure combined with the grip of great families on the political system, drives a considerable wedge between the citizens and the ruling elite. The rivalries between the political elite affect the national interests of Lebanon and contribute to the growing inefficiency of the public services.

## Putting the Protests into context

It is within this context that the people of Lebanon took to the streets. Following the government's announcement on 17 October 2019 to introduce a 20-cent daily charge on WhatsApp calls as well as other

austerity measures, Lebanese citizens united in mass protests against the ruling elite. Within a day protests spread from Beirut to other parts of the country resulting in a standstill countrywide. Protesters demand for the government to resign and demand an overhaul of the political system in order to create a government free from sectarianism. Although the government withdrew the tax only one hour after having announced it, Lebanese continued to protest as a result of the declining economy. In recent years, the Lebanese have been struggling with rising living costs, stagnating salaries as well as growing unemployment.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, mismanagement of budget resulted in the failure of public services visible in increasing power cuts as well as mass pollution and a failure of the country to manage its waste. According to the World Bank, one third

of the Lebanese population live below the poverty line with public debt amounting to more than 150 percent of the countries GDP.<sup>9</sup> The countries debt is a result of continued deficit spending and borrowing by the Lebanese government which, only weeks before the protest, resulted in a shortage of US dollars necessary to import goods such as medicine, food and gas.<sup>10</sup> Protesters blame the multi-sectarian political elite, established after the civil war in 1990, calling for the resignation of the corrupt government.

In an attempt to appease protesters, Prime Minister Hariri introduced economic reforms which included measurements such as cutting salaries of ministers and lawmakers in half and promised to reduce the cash deficit by \$3.4 billion.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Hariri spoke of a historic achievement when approving the 2020

budget without introducing new taxes and a deficit of 0.6%.<sup>12</sup> However, protesters rejected the economic reforms as they are 'too little too late' and continued calls for the resignation of the government. The government believes that the economic reforms will ensure \$11billion in donations from Western donors to further improve the Lebanese economy.

While the Christian Lebanese Forces under Samir Geagea withdrew four ministers from their national unity government, all other parties and politicians have not yet shown willingness to resign. On 24 October 2019, the long anticipated speech of President Michel Aoun hinted at the possibility of reshuffling the current government if the protest leaders would be willing to meet and discuss with the government.

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9 Jonathan, Wheatley. "Lebanon Promises Fiscal Reform to Quell Public Protests," Financial Times, October 23, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/4e9324ee-f3e5-11e9-a79c-bc9acae3b654>.

10 Heiko, Wimmen. "Lebanon's Revolt." Crisis Group, October 21, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/lebanons-revolt>.

11 Asharq AL-awsat. "Lebanon: Hariri Promises Sweeping Economic Reforms." October 22, 2019. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1955316/lebanon-hariri-promises-sweeping-economic-reforms>.

12 Asharq AL-awsat. "Lebanon: Hariri Promises Sweeping Economic Reforms." October 22, 2019. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1955316/lebanon-hariri-promises-sweeping-economic-reforms>.

<sup>13</sup> Protesters rejected Aoun's speech stating that their demands are not negotiable. The protests are spontaneous protests and have no leaders.

## What to expect?

For the first time in recent Lebanese history, the country is united beyond sectarianism, socio-economic status or geographic divides and is taking the streets through spontaneous protests unified over their desire to end corruption. And while the protests remain relatively spontaneous, legal committees have been established to protect arrested protesters – highlighting the unity as well as their desire to continue.

Nonetheless, the military remains the protesters biggest fear. The military only violently intervened during the first day, they have thus far refrained from using widespread violence against the protesters with the Armed Forces having protected protesters on one occasion from thugs supposedly dispatched by the Amal Movement and Hezbollah.<sup>14</sup> However, protesters are aware that government orders might violently attempt to crackdown on the movement.

Further, the fear of religious groups appropriating the protests prevails – especially when looking at the outcomes of the Arab Spring in neighbouring countries. However, thus far the Lebanese have ensured that none of the leaders become a voice of the movement which is fighting beyond religious differences.

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<sup>13</sup> Francis, Ellen, and Eric Knecht. "Lebanon's Aoun Invites Protesters to Talk, Hints at Government Reshuffle." *Reuters*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-aoun-idUSKBN1X31DC>.

<sup>14</sup> Itani, Faysal. "Resilient Lebanon? What Makes the Protests in Lebanon Different Than Before?" <https://www.fpri.org/>. Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 24, 2019. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/resilient-lebanon-what-makes-the-protests-in-lebanon-different-than-before/>.

Additionally, the introduction of a secular political system is at the core of the protesters demands – a demand that many fear could be undermined by the presence of religious leaders.<sup>15</sup>

It remains unclear how the government will react. While many were expecting the President's speech to shed light on the government's stance, the President has failed to deliver. And although

the resignation of four ministers can be perceived as a willingness of politicians to follow the demands, many are worried due to the President's request to negotiate.

However, the protesters are fighting for their movement to remain a peoples movement, and whether the major political change will follow or not, looking at Lebanese history, these protests are a remarkable social uprising for an otherwise divided country.

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15 Chalhouh, Samir. "Sosiale skiller viskes bort i libanesiske demonstrasjoner." *Levanten.no*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.levanten.no/new-blog-1/2019/10/23/sosiale-skiller-viskes-bort-i-libanesiske-demonstrasjoner>.

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[2] *Idem*.

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[4] *Idem*, p. 280.

[5] Ward Vloeberghs, *DYNAMIQUES DYNASTIQUES AU LIBAN : TRANSMETTRE LE POUVOIR POLITIQUE EN FAMILLE*, *Presses de Sciences Po | « Critique internationale »* 2016/4 N° 73, p. 71-72.

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(13) Francis, Ellen, and Eric Knecht. "Lebanon's Aoun Invites Protesters to Talk, Hints at Government Reshuffle." *Reuters*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-aoun-idUSKBN1X31DC>.

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(15) Chalhoub, Samir. "Sosiale skiller viskes bort i libanesiske demonstrasjoner." *Levanten.no*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.levanten.no/new-blog-1/2019/10/23/sosiale-skiller-viskes-bort-i-libanesiske-demonstrasjoner>.

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