

The Legacy of Lebanon's October Revolution

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Brief Analysis

Although the results of the October 2019 protests and the May 2022 elections brought hope to many Lebanese desperate for change, entrenched political deadlock and dysfunction are as bad as ever.

Several weeks ago, Lebanese marked the three-year anniversary of Lebanon's October 2019 revolution, which arose out of a popular anger at political leaders' systemic mismanagement of the country. Nevertheless, Lebanon's current social and economic situation is still grim, continuing to deteriorate even further over the past three years while Beirut careens into yet another political deadlock.

Current president Michel Aoun's presidential term is officially over, and the former president has vacated his official residence. After multiple parliamentary sessions devoted to electing his successor, Lebanon's MPs are still a long way off from agreeing on Aoun's replacement—the majority of ballots remained blank after the most recent round of voting—further highlighting the division and dysfunction of Lebanon's parliament.

The deadlock of these past weeks has once again emphasized Lebanon's systemic political dysfunction and its impact on the lives of ordinary Lebanese. While the results of Lebanon's May elections were initially touted as providing some glimmer of hope for reform, Lebanon's domestic political situation is nevertheless being dictated by its traditional political parties and rivalries, a position the Lebanese people can ill afford.

Initially, there was some hope in the country's new independent MPs as a political manifestation of the popular protests of 2019. Of those elected during last May's elections, thirteen independent MPs gained seats in the 128-seat legislature, marking a departure from previous elections such as the ones in 2018 in which only one independent gained a seat. However, the success of these independents was boosted by the expatriate vote, understood to have largely voted for independent candidates and with a participation rate that tripled compared to the previous elections cycle. Meanwhile, the vast majority of MPs remained under the control of establishment parties, while the 'Change' bloc of independents was too small and increasingly fractured to have much real legislative impact. Over the last several weeks, the 'Change' bloc has broken down under internal disagreements. MPs Michel Douaihy and Waddah Sadek have now officially left the bloc, while those who remain have struggled to work with other MPs or coordinate internally to stay politically relevant.

The traditional parties that continue to occupy the majority of Lebanon's parliament are a more apt reflection of the current government. It is remarkable that Lebanon's parliament includes those whom the judiciary charged in the crime of the port

explosion, as well three former energy ministers who utterly failed to improve this sector. Many Lebanese live without electricity and depend mainly on generators—which many can no longer afford given the exponential rise in the price of fuel—or in some cases on solar energy for those who can manage it. Lebanon’s faltering water sanitation system has likewise helped the rapid spread of cholera—a disease nonexistent in Lebanon for the past three decades—from similarly dire circumstances in Syria.

Meanwhile, these establishment parties are playing an insidious role in repainting the history of the 2019 revolution in order to avoid blame for Lebanon’s crumbling infrastructure. While the Lebanese people desperately need the return of the spirit that drove the 2019 revolution more than ever, Lebanon’s entrenched players have sought to convince their electorates to blame the movement for the country’s current economic and social ills through several avenues. The **well-healed media institutions (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/lebanese-protesters-turn-alternative-media-spread-message>)** of the Lebanese “deep state,” are hard at work demonizing the 2019 revolution and its results. Early on in the protests, photoshopped images or simply a lack of coverage led protesters to put out their own forms of media reporting. However, new media organizations such as Thawra TV that emerged in the aftermath of the revolution have a limited reach—dwarfed by the audiences of Lebanon’s media institutions owned by the entrenched parties.

These television channels and newspapers are blaming the revolution for the country’s faltering economy, ignoring the failed monetary policies of Lebanese governments and downplaying the arbitrary measures of the Central Bank that seized people’s savings and depleted Lebanon’s foreign currency reserves. During the revolution, Lebanese politicians and their affiliates and supporters attacked protestors who blocked roads. They claimed that protestors were furthering the economic collapse by forcing school closures and disrupting traffic and daily life. Voices can also be found labeling the October protests as “**intellectual terrorism.**”

(https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/article/1458160/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A---%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-17-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86--%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B0%D8%AC%D8%A7)) and using “intellectual intimidation, demonization, and treason of every opponent of its opinions.”

Today, the same narrative is again used against depositors who have begun forcibly holding up banks to obtain their own money, which most Lebanese can no longer access. While these protesters are often desperate and seeking money for the medical care or basic needs of loved ones, state and private-owned media have repeatedly blamed angry protestors for bank closures, rather than the corrupt and dysfunctional banking system.

At the social level, entrenched political forces have mobilized houses of worship and civil associations to attack the new members of parliament. Attacks include, for example, accusations of immorality and depravity due to the independent MPs’ support of voluntary civil marriage—an institution Lebanon lacks that should be the fundamental right of any Lebanese citizen according to the constitution.

A muted popular response to these independent MPs, along with the impact of establishment narratives against the 2019 revolution, raises the question of whether Lebanese popular will can once again solidify to protest the incessant continuation of Lebanon’s corrupt system, or whether it will buy the narrative presented by Lebanon’s establishment parties. If the Lebanese choose the latter, this system, dominated by merchants of war and those who feed off of sectarianism, will continue to drive policies within the government that impoverish and humiliate the Lebanese people.

The critical political and economic situations in the United States, Europe, and other Arab nations have further reduced international attention on Lebanon, including both the cascading repercussions of the invasion of Ukraine and the continued stagnation of any efforts to insulate the region from proxy or direct wars with Iran. Many Lebanese are now all too aware that its crises fail to rank among the priorities of major powers. This means that the country has little hope of external salvation—any change will only emerge from the reemergence of the kind of popular pressure Lebanese were able to exert in 2019.

The 2019 Revolution ultimately pointed to the solution of Lebanon’s core issue—when Lebanese join together to put aside sectarianism and internal decisions while holding its government truly accountable, the country has some sense of hope for change. However, the return and spread of such a movement would require that more Lebanese recognize that the interest of

their country does not lie in the survival of entrenched political parties. Until traditional parties can no longer rely on their **core supporters** (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/lebanons-election-offers-lessons-now-and-future>) to get the same results election after election plus support during the rest of the year as the country slides into chaos, Lebanese will have to share in the blame for their country's ongoing demise. ❖

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