BECOMING UNGOVERNABLE: STRATEGIES AND MODES OF DISSENT IN LEBANON'S UPRISING

BASSEM SAAD AND EDWIN NASR

Years of state and non-state actors economically suffocating policies have given rise to a series of massive revolts in Lebanon. Arguing against the myth of Lebanese resilience, Bassem Saad and Edwin Nasr gives account of how protesters found common ground to forge efficient alliances.

Popular uprisings are rarely ever "happy accidents," and yet, efforts at locating a set of factors for their occurrence often blow the whistle on their spontaneity. Whether a supposed alignment of agency and material conditions can account for the particular juncture at which hundreds of thousands of people in Lebanon revolted, or that the revolutionary fervor witnessed and experienced across Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria had finally spilled over, remains to be seen. For now, the popular uprising is still ongoing, and with it, articulations of dissent consistently mutate as the state continues to violently enforce business-as-usual.

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On October 17, 2019, the Lebanese "national unity" government, headed by Saad Hariri, agreed on the implementation of austerity measures that would include a tax on internet calls. Then, the country was on the brink of financial collapse due to an impending dollar shortage crisis, and Hariri's ministers were concocting measures in response to a contract of trust it had signed with the international community (through the Paris-hosted CEDRE conference) that would ensure the provision of loans and grants. These measures, while undeniably mortifying, also came at the most inopportune of times; the government demonstrated, only mere days earlier, its complete inadequacy to respond to a scenario of catastrophe after wildfires had ravaged 3,700 acres of productive forests across the country. Thousands of angry demonstrators thronged to the streets of Beirut's downtown area, though no political parties or unions had instructed them to so. Soon enough, the protests spread to most of the country's towns and cities — Tripoli in the North, Saida and Nabatieh in the South, and the Chouf district and Jal el Dib in Mount Lebanon. Within a week, more than two million inhabitants of Lebanon would participate in mass street protests, then encouraged by general strikes affecting both the public and the private sectors. Some of the more reformist demands, advanced primarily by civil society actors and organizations, ranged from the resignation of the Hariri government — and the subsequent formation of an "independent" technocratic one — to the recovery of stolen state assets and the provision of basic social services such as water, electricity, and healthcare.

But the general mood was distinctively radical in its disillusionment with the postwar neoliberal order as well as in its refusal to concede to legitimizing schemes and power-sharing arrangements by the sectarian-clientelist regime. The Hariri government's resignation, on October 29, did little to appease popular rage. Instead, the uprising adopted a spatio-temporality characterized by geographical decentralization and an indefinite duration, and succeeded at rendering the country ungovernable. The reliance on mass participation and filling out public squares had waned over time. Instead, the task at hand involved devising insurrectionary activities that could confound the security apparatus of the state and its militias in order to effectively target the circulation process of capital in the country. Ever since the emergence of neoliberal governance in the 1990s, most workers' unions in the country have been co-opted by traditional sectarian parties, making it tremendously difficult to call for effective general strikes and organize targeted actions. Moreover, in the past three decades or so, there's been a near halt on the formation of reformist parties able to integrate the electoral arena or claim a significant constituency. Without these structures to take advantage of or operate from, the uprising has imaginatively resorted to autonomous forms of organizing, allowing it to extend itself through geographical space and strategic time. These have included nationwide mutual aid task forces, volunteer-run media platforms, and anonymized coordination committees, all of which were implemented to counter state-sponsored disinformation and conditions of insecurity, as well as increased precarization resulting from the ongoing financial crisis.

On November 6, 2019, thousands of demonstrators stormed the entrance of Lancaster Eden Bay resort, located on Beirut's seafront, and called for the reclaiming of public maritime property. / Photo by Tariq Keblaoui.

There's a consensus among inhabitants of Lebanon around representing the state as "weak" or, at least, as weakened by autonomous formations that constrain or even obstruct its bureaucratic, administrative, and military duties for sectarian and clientelist interests. While the October uprising has yet to produce a unified political discourse with distinct ideological tenets, it has undoubtedly triumphed in dismissing previous misconceptions of the regime it operated against. The Taif Agreement of 1989 brought alongside its implementation a "nominal" end to the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil wars. What it ended up furthering instead was the facilitation power-sharing arrangements among traditional sectarian parties and emboldening clientelist networks by downright incapacitating the public sector. The agreement paved the way for predatory neoliberal measures that led to processes of mass privatization and expropriation, spearheaded by then Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, whilst traditional sectarian parties increasingly engaged in the purveying of welfare services, often through non-state providers and organizations, in order to preserve their respective constituencies of support. These configurations of power would inform our actions as well as our collective understanding of what we were up against: that the Lebanese regime shouldn't be restricted to its derelict public institutions but understood as an assemblage of state and nonstate actors alike, and that the political distribution of precarities and insecurities also operates through hybrid forms of sovereignty. Within the past decade, most protests movements that occurred in Lebanon, from the 2011 protests against the parliament's illegal extension of its mandate to the 2015 anti-government movement decrying long-standing waste management problems, failed precisely due to their myopic understanding of the ways in which power and capital reproduce themselves. The October uprising, regardless of its outcome, could at least claim to have formulated a totalizing vision of all that is rotten at the core of the sectarian-clientelist regime.

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Before then, much had been written about Lebanon's "resilience": in its weathering of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, in its resistance to spillover from the war in Syria, and in its housing of close to two million Syrian refugees, who, we are told, have been welcomed very generously, nevermind the occasional curfew in this or that besmirched town. The term resilience, in its contemporary usage in policy, has been critiqued by left-wing practitioners for ultimately preservering the existing dominant order in the face of a reified condition of crisis. In practice, the international community's investment in Lebanon's resilience had translated into continued support for clientelist infrastructure projects attached to the same handful of oligarchic figures comprising the top tier of Lebanon's political class. This nexus of clientelist public-private subcontracting that has consistently proven not to provide adequate services includes waste management systems, electricity-generating powerships, geotechnical water supply augmentation solutions, and the two major telecom networks. The crisis brought with it the hope that perhaps this was the crash that the system could not survive, that this was where that cycle of resilience could finally be exited. The first days of the uprising beamed with fervor and brought the networks and infrastructures of our daily hells to a total halt. Soon enough, counter-revolutionary media claimed that the demonstrators engaging in roadblocks had summoned the spectres of Lebanese civil wars militiamen, and so roadblocking activity soon gave way to more precise and targeted action at ministries and public facilities. The revolutionary groups were thus effectively pressured to sublimate their total refusal into intelligible demands directed at specific authorities, for fear of being framed as politically nihilist and of losing public support. A series of targeted protests followed, taking the form of marches, sit-ins, and closures, at the Électricité du Liban, the main Lebanese electricity producer; the construction site of the Bisri Dam, currently in the phase of land expropriation; the Lancaster Eden Bay Hotel, the building of which was a private encroachment on public coastal land; and Ogero, the country's landline service provider, among many others.

That line of thinking that seeks an end to the resilience of the current political order finds hope in the potential inability of the recently-formed government to secure funding and investment from the international community, due to its close proximity to the 'axis of resistance,' namely Hezbollah and the Syrian and Iranian regimes. The new government's response to continued mobilization has been near-total crackdown, with escalated crowd control weapon use and mass prosecution of demonstrators. It is of note here that two French corporations, Alsetex and SAPL, have been uncovered by activist groups as the manufacturers of some of the crowd control weapons being used in Lebanon but not in France, in a sort of neo-colonial exchange of expertise between military-industrial complexes. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether the government will be able to enact any policies to mitigate the forbidding spiral of economic collapse, but the threat of IMF-engineered austerity looms.

The effervescence of the early days of the uprising led many to exclaim that our loneliness had been vanquished, that the isolation that our dissident selves had endured is finally over and that we'd now been reunited, "across sect and class," with one another. However, that initial illusionment soon wore off after the central public squares ceased to be occupied weekly by millions, and after it became routine practice for traditional sectarian party supporters to attack demonstrators and tents. The potent lesson eventually learned by the non-aligned protesters was that no group or subpopulation was required to prove their unfaltering dedication to all of the revolution's demands or to its non-sectarian character. Strategic alliances were repeatedly made and unmade throughout these 100 or so days between non-aligned groups and sectarian party supporters; Future Movement/Hariri supporters could be counted on to engage in effective roadblocking in Beirut after the former Prime Minister had resigned, and Hezbollah-leaning youths would forge shoulder-to-shoulder with Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) members in attacking the Central Bank for implementing disastrous monetary policies over the year, but also for willfully applying U.S. financial sanctions on the Hezb's cadres.

The complex swarm of social mobilization that we now call the October uprising continues to unfold and will inevitably be differentially narrated by the actors within it and counter to it. An alternative account and genealogy must not fail to mention that the summer of 2019 witnessed the ire and revolt of the country's Palestinian population, whose workers were placed in bureaucratics limbo and asked to procure work permits that were impossible to issue, after decades of unrecgonized living and laboring in Lebanon. What can't be erased is the fact that we marched and cursed for months the names of heads of state that have respawned in perpetuity, that sentiment of breathless frustration best exemplified and memed by a recent incident when demonstrators who tore a meters-tall image of Nabih Berri, Speaker of Parliament for more than 28 years, were faced with another image of Nabih Berri right underneath it. Stamped in our minds will remain the transgenerational dialogues exchanged with seasoned political activists who had participated in past movements, the LCP-affiliated youths' storming of the Association of Lebanese Banks, the feminist bloc that dominated marches armed with megaphones and cunning rhymes, but perhaps most importantly, the nameless masked figures risking prosecution, injury, and death, as they set ablaze the pillars of the wretched society we had come to know. ■

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