
Making Sure the Lebanese Revolution Does Not Devour Its Own Children

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ABSTRACT

When protests broke out across Lebanon on 17 October 2019, very few people anticipated the political, economic, and financial consequences that the country finds itself facing today. In an unprecedented buildup of events, a government resigned, a monetary crisis sharply accelerated, and uncertainty about the future of a nation spiked. And while the first few weeks have been particularly raging, a relative status quo between protesters and the government seems to have prevailed. This article makes the case for four essential changes that the Lebanese revolution may want to consider to avoid stagnation and potential decay and ultimately achieve results and a significant breakthrough in political representation.

Revolutions can often linger and slowly fade away because of street fatigue, government counter-insurgency, internal schisms, or lack of vision, and this is exactly what the Lebanese revolution cannot afford to do.

Despite ebbs and flows in scale and intensity, one ought to recognize the material changes that a hundred days of relentless protests have already brought about. Dismissing the latter as dull, ineffective, or unsuccessful is a judgmental oversimplification of the magnitude of what has been achieved thus far regardless of some setbacks.

Citizens of all regions, religions, political affiliations, and socioeconomic

backgrounds have come together to denounce decades of kleptocracy, incompetence, and clientelism. The Hariri government, a landmark of the broken model of consensual democracy that has plagued the country for 30 years, has fallen, leaving the political establishment scrambling and exposed. Decentralized protests have reached regions and targeted political figures once considered untouchable. For the first time, the need for accountability and proper governance are headlining any plausible path forward.

But the establishment has fought back. It has regenerated itself under its own auspices in a government of so-called independent technocrats primarily appointed by Hezbollah and Amal—the Shiite duet—with the cover of the Free Patriotic Movement, the main Christian bloc. It has tapped into its carefully crafted security apparatus to deter, arrest, and harass protesters. It has flexed its central and commercial banking muscles to put immense financial pressure on the day-to-day life of citizens and businesses through informal capital controls, cash-withdrawal restrictions, and two de facto parallel black markets for foreign currency, making them believe that the acute financial crisis had hit *as a result* of the protests. In times of existential threat, the political-security-banking troika consolidates and retaliates.

At the end of the day, the question is not whether or not the Lebanese revolution—because it is, after all, a revolution that is forcing change and awareness and not a sheer movement, as many detractors have called it—has succeeded or failed, because one can spin it either way one wants.

The question is how to build on the momentum that protesters have garnered to date and on the proven vulnerability of the political establishment to transform the revolution and take it forward. Indeed, a static revolution in the presence of a shrewd, determined establishment devours its own children. A dynamic and adaptive revolution delivers actionable results. I can think of four main changes that have become essential at this stage of the game.

First, protesters should consider dropping the leaderless, it-is-not-our-job-to-come-up-with-plans approach and start proposing visions for the future of the country's political, economic, and financial systems.

Despite the impromptu and leaderless nature of the protests being successful and necessary at the early stages of the revolution, they now need a vision and ideas and faces behind that vision. It is critical to understand and explain to the masses that whoever steps up to the plate is by no means speaking *for* the people but is instead proposing a vision that people could either dismiss or choose to rally behind.

Such visions will have to touch upon vital issues including which form of government to adopt (e.g., secular-sectarian bicameral legislature), which productive industries to prioritize, how to fairly address the debt burden, how to design tax incidence, and how to smartly structure foreign policy, to name a few. Work is already underway on platforms such as Lebanocracia at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University to help identify high-priority dimensions of potential visions and engage the public in designing policy and data-based solutions.¹

As it stands, previous governments have not answered any of these questions convincingly (if at all), but neither have protesters. Distraught and angry rhetoric will only take the revolution so far. There is a need to design and communicate one or more convincing visions and detailed road maps that will give the Lebanese people a concrete alternative to what is currently in place—hope is an emotional parasite and can no longer be a strategy.

Second, protesters should reconsider the timeline of their demand for early elections. There is no doubt that protests have served their purpose in generating internal pressure and attracting international attention: the world is now watching, albeit potentially for the wrong reasons, as several bond payments to international creditors are due as of March.

The truth is, nevertheless, that people can take to the streets all they want, but within the confines of avoiding severe bloodshed and a potential civil war, legitimate and recognizable change will have to come through the ballot box. And it is exactly at the latter that the revolution is likely to get crushed should early elections take place in the coming few months.

Set aside an unfavorable electoral law and gerrymandering, established political parties have ample funding and decades of experience running for elections, managing campaigns, and mobilizing people—two critical assets that the protesters currently lack.

Therefore, third, and most importantly, protesters should begin organizing as soon as possible to design and launch a structured, nationwide, grassroots movement with arms and legs to rally people behind the visions they are offering. Protesters will indeed benefit from more time to crystallize electoral programs, find the right people to run, organize on the ground, and build a network of activists and volunteers.

Some may understandably argue that more pressing priorities such as the country's approach to debt restructuring or its strategy to alleviate the cash crunch warrant more urgent attention. This nevertheless brings about the notion of decision making and control: your average protester—be they an army retiree, a university student, or a grandmother of eight—can engage effectively immediately in building such a grassroots movement. They cannot call the shots, at least for now, on whether to seek support from the IMF or default on the debt. They can, however, start or join their local chapter, knock on doors, engage in the conversation, and influence their networks.

The closest thing to a successful grassroots movement the country has witnessed was the Beirut Madinati municipal elections campaign in 2016, which despite a very short runway and humble resources, managed to garner 40 percent of the vote in the capital.² Although municipal and

parliamentary elections differ in nature and significance, there is room to build on the experience of organizing and scaling such a campaign as well as on the lessons learned from the 2018 parliamentary elections disillusion.

New tactics such as the ones deployed by French President Emmanuel Macron's En Marche! party in the 2017 legislative elections to source, filter, and train qualified candidates are worth considering and adapting to the Lebanese model.³ Similarly, nascent youth-led advocacy organizations such as the Sunrise Movement have proven very effective at rallying people nationwide, setting up local hubs rapidly and organizing town halls and targeted sit-ins similar to the ones several public entities have witnessed in major Lebanese cities. Here again, leveraging commonalities and success stories could help deploy strategies that the current establishment might not be familiar with and will hence struggle to take down.

According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, there were 3.75 million registered voters in the 2018 elections, 49.7 percent of whom actually voted.⁴ Even under the significantly flawed 2018 electoral law, convincing and mobilizing less than a million people would have yielded a parliamentary majority. Lebanon is small and changeable. An ambitious and structured nationwide sweep coupled with a sustained memory of the fragility of the establishment may turn the table on election day.

Fourth, activists should now take the conversation to the right forums—white papers, journal articles (including this one), and elitist intellectual conversations behind closed doors are important but are barely scratching the surface of the target popular base. Indeed, protesters may be spending too much time convincing the segment of the population that does not need to be convinced and are overlooking the importance of engaging whoever they perceive as “the others,” namely avid supporters of current political parties.

An essential battle separating the Lebanese revolution from wide-ranging parliamentary representation is its ability to attract demographic tranches once considered beyond reach. A method seemingly untested in Lebanon is what Stanford sociologist Robb Willer and University of Toronto social psychologist Mathew Feinberg describe as persuasion by reframing political arguments in terms of the moral values of the target audiences.⁵

What this could mean on the ground, for example, is that what was once delivered as “your political leader is corrupt and should be prosecuted”—which is probably true—could be positioned as “we both believe in the need for honesty and the supremacy of the law to build a fair and functioning country, so we should actively investigate, denounce, and penalize whoever is hindering that effort and is proven guilty.” This may sound trivial and idealistic, but winning back parliament under the current circumstances may need to find its roots in political psychology, a field that the Lebanese protests have not yet incorporated into their planning and outreach activities.

The coming months promise to be tough and draining for all Lebanese citizens. The fight, nevertheless, is one for dignity, justice, and prosperity. Taking down what I often refer to as the ingrained paper cantons of sectarianism, lawlessness, and subordination is not an overnight undertaking. Mistakes will be made along the way. What matters, however, is the unrelenting willingness to keep adapting the revolution and acting upon changes when strategies begin to stall. In this existential game of political Pac-Man we are all in, this seems to be the only way forward.

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Endnote

- 1 Paul de Coustin, "Liban: Lebanonocracia: une plateforme qui hiérarchise les mesures urgentes souhaitées par le peuple," *Le Figaro*, 22 November 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/liban-lebanocracia-une-plateforme-qui-hierarchise-les-mesures-urgentes-souhaitees-par-le-peuple-20191122>.
- 2 Jad Chaaban et al., *Beirut's 2016 Municipal Elections: Did Beirut Madinati Permanently Change Lebanon's Electoral Scene?* (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2016) [PDF file].
- 3 William Galibert, "Élections législatives: un comité d'investiture déjà à l'oeuvre dans le camp d'En Marche!," *Europe 1*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/elections-legislatives-un-comite-dinvestiture-deja-a-loeuvre-dans-le-camp-den-marche-3311846>.
- 4 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Election Guide, Lebanese Republic, June 2018.
- 5 Robb Willer and Matthew Feinberg, "The Key to Political Persuasion," *The New York Times*, 13 November 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/opinion/sunday/the-key-to-political-persuasion.html>.