
Memes and Collapse

An Alternative View of Lebanon's October 17 Protests

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ABSTRACT

In the postwar era, residents of Lebanon have been heavily impacted by what Sami Hermez called the “anticipation of violence” or, in other words, being stuck between past violence and perceived future violence. This has notably encouraged sectarianism, localism, and regionalism at the expense of any trans-sectarian identities. As the anti-government protests enter their fourth month, this piece looks at some of the attempts to address this widespread feeling of inevitable collapse. Memes and jokes are being deployed by anti-government and anti-sectarian activists to rebel against the fear and fearmongering that benefit the ruling sectarian class.

Of all the countless memes and jokes that have come out of Lebanon since the start of the uprising on 17 October 2019, one in particular speaks volumes. It starts with an assertion commonplace in political and media circles: “Mom, the country will collapse” (*Mama rayhin aal inhyar*). Referring to the ongoing political and economic crisis brought on by decades of corruption, this sentence can often be heard, in various formats, in everyday conversation. But because *rayhin* can also mean “we are going” (to a location), *mama rayhin aal inhyar* can be followed by a number of joke responses: “Ask your mom first (if you can go),” “Where is *inhyar*? Is it in our region?,” “Okay, but please

stand up straight," "Our neighbor's kids would stay at home."

This meme's transformation of alarmism into humor illustrates the ways in which Millennials and Gen-Zers are rebelling against the fear and fearmongering of the wider population. This feeling that "we" are going toward some state of collapse reflects a normalized anticipation of violence in Lebanon, particularly by the generations who experienced the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) firsthand. The term "anticipation of violence" was coined by anthropologist Sami Hermez, who made the case in 2012 that Lebanon's residents are stuck between past violence and perceived future violence. With the wounds of the past unresolved, the collective imagination became restricted in the postwar era. Given that the only manifestation of the collective "we" in Lebanon is associated with collective destruction, negative sectarianism, localism, and regionalism are thus encouraged at the expense of any positive collective identity.

Hermez's research can help explain why so many Lebanese had stopped expecting the possibility of a mass civic uprising. Although the underlying tensions that built up to the ongoing protests had already been fomenting—expressed for example in the 2015 "You Stink!" movement and several smaller protests before that—the lack of concrete positive change to come out of earlier protests or the 2016 and 2018 elections left many people feeling doubtful that the corrupt system could be overthrown. In addition, the 2018 elections were the first elections that many Millennials could vote in, since parliament had illegally extended its term three times, in 2013, 2014, and 2017. Meanwhile, many Gen-Zers are still not of voting age. In a society where freedom is constrained by erratic elections designed to limit the available options through a sectarian quota system, perceived civic failures have accelerated a sense of hopelessness.

Thus, the overtly anti-sectarian nature of the October 17 protests

revealed a level of political engagement among young people that seemed to take almost everyone by surprise, especially in light of out-migration trends among recent university graduates. Confronted with widespread hopelessness and little opportunity, many students relocate to Western or Gulf countries upon graduation.

The anticipation of violence translates into an inability to view long-term commitments to the country as worthwhile, because it is assumed that “the situation” can always descend into what anthropologist and filmmaker Joanne Nucho called “wartime.” In other words, even in times of “peace,” conflict is never far away. Whether the source of disillusionment is the geopolitical realities of a Middle Eastern country whose only two land borders are Israel and Syria and whose government is often entangled in the political priorities of the West, Saudi Arabia, and Iran or whether it is the sectarian system itself, it is not difficult to understand why generations of students are raised to believe that the most prized possession a Lebanese citizen can have is a foreign passport.

This anticipation of violence has been regularly vindicated in the postwar era, from Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s assassination in 2005 and the multiple car bombs in the years that followed to the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, the 7 May 2008 conflict that saw Hezbollah and its allies militarily take over large parts of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and the post-2011 repressions in the Middle East and North Africa. Since October 17 alone, the sectarian system’s representatives—from the *shabitha* (sectarian thugs) affiliated with Hezbollah and Amal to the government’s multiple security forces—have left hundreds injured and at least three persons killed. One of the most vivid evocations of the anticipation of violence has been the chants by Hezbollah and Amal supporters calling for “another May 7th.”¹

In other words, violence, however diffuse, is never far away from daily life

in Lebanon. It permeates expectations of what one can expect from the near future. Furthermore, the feeling of collapse is often accelerated by its physical manifestations: in the weeks following the protests, various roads were flooded² due to the heavy rainfall, and some even collapsed,³ highlighting, once again, the country's notoriously poor infrastructure. The floods were also turned into memes by protesters who used the opportunity to argue for strategic roadblocks. The argument put forward was that roads are regularly closed due to weak infrastructure, so roadblocks, believed to be a comparatively effective form of protest, are at least purposeful. These arguments were imbued with humor and sarcasm, along the lines of "why do you complain when we [protestors] block the roads and not when the rain does?"

To put it differently, the metaphorical collapse of the country is manifesting itself through a series of physical collapses accompanied by the structural inability, or unwillingness, of the sectarian system to save itself from an inevitable end. At the same time, this collapse is being utilized by groups of protesters who see no other means of resistance than trying to persuade "the other"—anyone from sectarian loyalists to their own family members—to join the cause.

The *mama rayhin aal inhyar* meme is an expression of a widespread desire in the country to utilize the "energy of hopelessness," to use Lebanese-British scholar Andrew Arsan's words, and transform it into something more hopeful. It is the cynicism of the sectarian system that is being rejected by creative protesters who seem increasingly aware that its rejection requires more effort than previously believed. As one protester participating in Beirut's Martyrs' Square told Lebanese journalist Kareem Chehayeb, "We need to believe it's important to be happy, not just to survive."⁴

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Endnotes

- 1 Laryssa Aoun, "عندما يطالب انصار حزب الله وحركة أمل بـ ٧ أيار جديد .. همجية وكراهية وعنف وتحريض ومذهبية..." 25 November 2019, 3:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/LarissaAounSky/status/1199045620641730560>.
- 2 "Heavy rain causes floods, paralyzes Lebanon's capital," Associated Press, 9 December 2019, apnews.com/26c3d3e8ed24745b53edafb35ca4d0ad.
- 3 "Une route seffondre à Mansourieh, la circulation coupée," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 3 January 2020, www.lorientlejour.com/article/1200740/une-route-seffondre-a-mansourieh-la-circulation-definitivement-coupee.html.
- 4 Kareem Chehayeb, "For 2020, Lebanese protesters vow to make new year revolutions," *Middle East Eye*, 1 January 2020, www.middleeasteye.net/news/2020-lebanese-protesters-vow-make-new-year-revolutions.