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Lebanon's uprising, between hope and hard truths

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Alex Rowell



It's never easy to be optimistic about Lebanon, but the uprising of the past week offers a real chance for lasting change—if the protest movement plays its cards well.

Lebanon doesn't make optimism easy, but it would be a truly soulless cynic who wasn't moved by the scenes of the past seven days. The country has seen other large protests

in recent years, most notably in 2015, but this is of another category entirely. One felt it on Sunday long before even reaching it—there were demonstrations on the way to the demonstrations. The scores of people walking with Lebanese flags towards the city center in my neighborhood of Mar Mikhael became hundreds at the start of Gemmayze, growing to thousands mid-way through that iconic street, all marching as one united body, carrying home-made placards (“Stop Electile Dysfunction;” “I cancelled a Tinder date to be here”), singing the national anthem, and chanting unprintable things about the country’s top politicians.

On arrival at downtown itself, the spectacle was simply astonishing. A billowing sea of flags brought our stride to a halt long before we could even see Martyrs Square, drowning the feet of the giant Muhammad al-Amin mosque that was not so much the epicenter as one of the two poles, the other being Riad al-Solh Square 350 meters to its west. As far as the eye could see (and indeed well beyond), people had scaled walls, billboards, buildings and balconies; or were dancing to a nearby drummer’s beat; or joining in the chants blared out loudspeakers atop parked trucks spaced at even intervals in all directions. I had never seen a gathering nearly as large in the city before; my wife, who witnessed the largest single demonstration in Lebanon’s history, that of 14 March, 2005, said it felt comparable in scale.

Who exactly was demonstrating? Anyone and everyone: octogenarian grandmothers; parents with newborn babies; bony adolescents in Guy Fawkes masks on scooters; middle-aged couples; women in the distinctive black chadors worn by Shia; Druze men in their traditional white

caps; left-wing radicals in Che t-shirts and checkered kufiyas; university students switching between Arabic and American-English; well-off white-collar professionals chatting in French. It was still possible, during the 2015 protests, for detractors to claim attendees were blinkered elites out of touch with the common citizen. Any such suggestion today would be plainly preposterous, not least since Tripoli—Lebanon’s poorest city—has been the site of some of the largest and liveliest demonstrations in the country.

If Sunday’s turnout was the highest of the week, festivities were nonetheless undeterred on Tuesday by the incident the previous night, when a convoy of young men on scooters waving Hezbollah flags and chanting aggressively tried to break into Beirut’s protest space, being repelled by force by the army. Arriving at Martyrs Square at 7:30pm on Tuesday evening, expecting to find much-diminished numbers, I was amazed to see there were still tens of thousands on the scene, looking more comfortably settled than ever. Rows of stalls selling water, snacks, corn on the cob, Lebanese flags, and even shisha had sprung up to provide everything a protester could need for their shift (the bars in nearby Gemmayze, too, had spilled over the sidewalks onto the roads to accommodate the numbers of parched revolutionaries needing refreshment). Six nights in, the capital’s uprising was showing no sign of flagging—and the same went for the sister protests held simultaneously all over the country, from Tripoli and Halba in the north to Sidon and Tyre in the south to Baalbek in the east.

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The immediate trigger for all this was—improbable as it

now seems in retrospect—a tax proposed by the government on WhatsApp calls, which led to roads being blocked in anger in various parts of the country on Thursday night. Of course, the tax was only the straw that broke the ungulate’s back. In reality, the protests are the eruption of a fury built up over many years and even decades; a fury against the vulture class of mobsters and oligarchs—most of them key protagonists of the 1975-90 civil war—who have run the country into the ground while amassing staggering wealth for themselves and a tiny circle of cronies. At the best of times, the state is incapable of providing round-the-clock electricity or potable water. But the past few weeks have not been the best of times. A looming economic implosion has put the value of the Lebanese pound in jeopardy, causing a liquidity crisis that saw ATMs temporarily run out of cash. Bakery and gas station strikes followed, creating colossal traffic jams and a general sense of deep malaise, as well as incredulity that a government could be so singularly incompetent during peacetime. (Even the devastating war with Israel in 2006 didn’t close the fuel pumps, as many Lebanese pointed out.) So to then be told that the officials responsible for these astounding failures would be slapping new taxes on the people who paid their salaries, while leaving their own substantial perks untouched, was a humiliation too far. When the armed bodyguards of a cabinet minister confronted protestors on the first night by firing live rounds in the air, inspiring a fearless woman to kick one of them in the groin in what immediately became an [iconic image](#), a movement was born.

Among the most uplifting forms this movement has taken has been the conscious reclamation of public space seized at the end of the civil war by the semi-governmental firm

Solidere and closed to the general population ever since. On Sunday, I joined thousands of others in making my first entrance into the famous Grand Theater facing Riad al-Solh Square, an architectural jewel built in the 1920s that once hosted such prominent French stars of the interwar period as Marie Bell and Charles Boyer, as well as a conference by the British suffragist Margery Corbett Ashby in 1935, Kassir, Samir, Beirut, University of California Press, 2010, pp. 312-3, 337. before militiamen reduced it to a porn cinema in the early years of the war that later half-destroyed it. Climbing through a hole in the wall erected by Solidere to keep the public out, we then queued (in remarkably orderly fashion) to walk up the staircase at the entrance, feeling like tourists at some historic site in Florence or Istanbul. Inside, the mood was curious and respectful, people treading carefully (in part to avoid falling through the huge holes in the floor) and waiting their turn to photograph the panoramic views of the protests from the many balconies. Later I did the same at the carcass known as "The Egg" overlooking Martyrs Square; a cinema under construction at the outbreak of war in 1975 that has been frozen in time ever since.



Beirut's Grand Theater (Alex Rowell/Al-Jumhuriya)



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View from Beirut's Grand Theater, 20 October, 2019 (Alex Rowell/Al-Jumhuriya)



Inside Beirut's "Egg" building, 20 October, 2019 (Alex Rowell/Al-Jumhuriya)



View from Beirut's "Egg" building, 20 October, 2019 (Alex Rowell/Al-Jumhuriya)

Trying to pinpoint what it was about this illicit tour that was so exhilarating, I later realized it was the joy of living in the manner outlined by Václav Havel in *The Power of the*

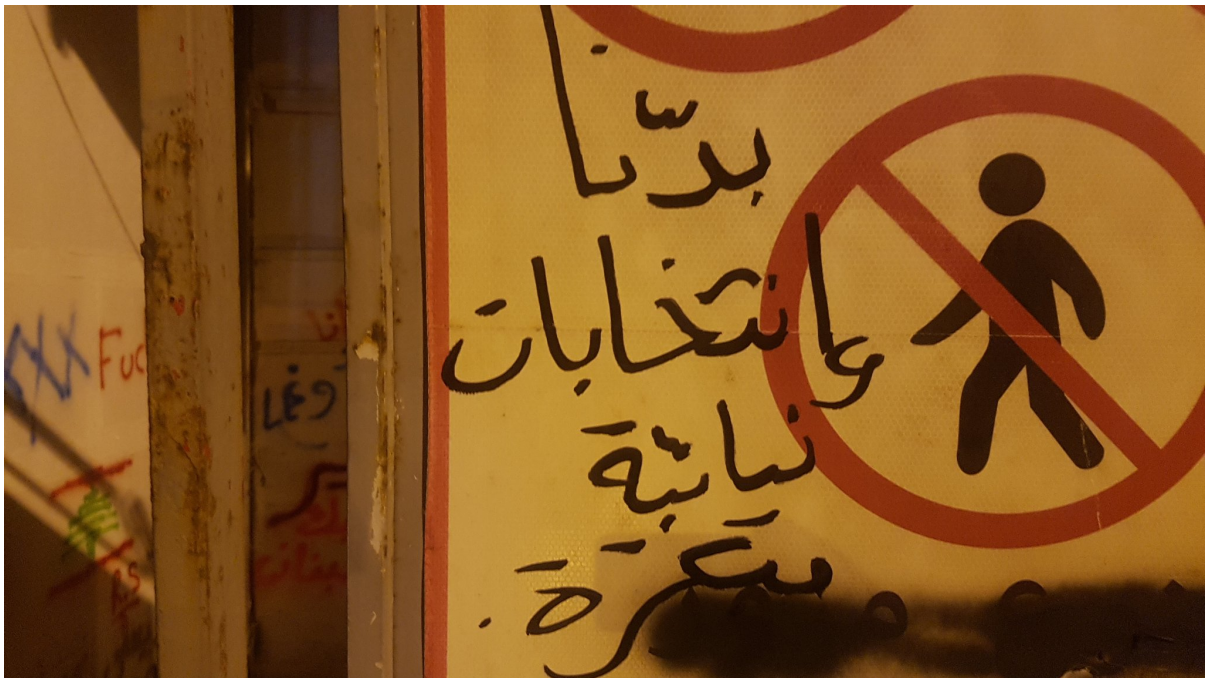
Powerless; the joy of living “as if:” “as if” you could actually watch a play at the Grand Theater, or a film at The Egg; “as if” there was a park you could picnic in downtown; “as if” strangers of all different sects and socioeconomic classes could sing and dance together without discomfort or tension; “as if” the Beirut so many want to live in existed after all; “as if” the criminals who brought the country to ruin were no longer in charge. It was an exercise in mass imagination, a beautiful collective fantasy, and for these seven days, it’s seemed wholly real; indeed it has been wholly real.

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It feels almost distasteful to talk about what comes next while the party in the streets is still ongoing. Yet one can be sure the ruling clique is doing exactly that, and making plans accordingly. If this is not all to end in yet more heartbreak and despair—made all the more bitter for coming after such intoxicating euphoria—then it’s past time the prospective government-in-waiting did the same.

Any such exercise must start by acknowledging that the obstacles to success remain vast, at least in the immediate future. Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah has ruled out toppling the cabinet (let alone the presidency), which makes even this modest goal appear all but unattainable. That in itself need not be too disheartening, however, for in my humble (and unsolicited) opinion, focusing on the cabinet has little value, given the nature of the Lebanese system as defined by the constitution. Recall what happens when the cabinet resigns: the president gets together with MPs to nominate a new prime minister, who in turn consults with MPs to form the new cabinet. In other words, as long as it’s the same

president and MPs, you're only reshuffling the same rigged deck. Well aware of this, the more savvy activists call for early parliamentary elections (see photo below), which is certainly closer to the mark. Per the constitution, parliament is the source of all power: it elects the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of parliament. If the aim is to get rid of the same old faces once and for all, there's simply no available path other than going through parliament.



Graffiti reading "We want early parliamentary elections," Beirut, 22 October, 2019 (Alex Rowell/Al-Jumhuriya)

Amazingly, Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri more or less offered early elections in his address on Monday, saying if that was what demonstrators wanted, then "I'm with you." If this is a bluff, it's one the protest movement would be well-advised to call. It's true that the current electoral law is

gerrymandered to favor the incumbents, which is one reason the [civil-society-backed independents](#) were so comfortably steamrolled at the ballot box just last year. Any acceptance of Hariri's offer would of course thus have to be conditional on a new, fairer electoral law, which would in itself spark a battle likely to drag on for many months, if not years. "The people want a new electoral law" may not be as exciting a slogan as "Revolution!" but it's exactly the fight that has to be fought (and won) if the incumbents are to be thrown out once and for all, and not just reappear in another cabinet six months down the line. (Hezbollah is, obviously, the great exception to all of this, given its exceedingly powerful militia, which it won't hesitate to use without the slightest regard for laws of any kind should it ever find its power truly threatened.)

So, no, Lebanon doesn't make optimism easy. Those who lived through the highs of 2015-18, and then the numbing defeat of last year's elections, know this better than most. Yet it's precisely this fact, seen in the proper light, that makes what's happening now all the more remarkable. The people have taken to the streets, risking their safety and livelihoods, as though all the things they previously knew about their country's politics no longer mattered. Many speak of the barrier of "fear" having been broken, and this is particularly true of the protesters in predominantly-Shia places like Tyre and Nabatieh, who have been repeatedly assaulted by stick-wielding thugs loyal to Hezbollah and its sidekick, the Amal Movement. A friend [prefers](#) to say it's the barrier of "apathy and acquiescence" that has been overcome. Either way, it's clear a genie has escaped the bottle that will be very difficult to push back in. In a [letter](#) published Monday to the late Samir Kassir, the novelist Elias Khoury wrote, "We no longer need imagine what a secular,

non-sectarian Lebanon would look like.” What exactly the new Lebanon will look like is for the demonstrators alone to determine. But a new Lebanon it undoubtedly already is.

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