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The Mass Demonstrations in Lebanon: What Do They Portend?

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The demonstrations throughout Lebanon over the last week erupted spontaneously and saw a full range of the population participating and calling on the leaders of all communities to form a new government and change the current order. The immediate trigger for the protest was a decision to impose a tax on WhatsApp calls; at the heart of the demonstrations, however, is the worsening economic situation and paralysis of a "unity government" hard-put to progress toward solutions that can improve the situation. The mass protest reflects the despair and exasperation with a corrupt leadership. On the other hand, there are signs that all components of the leadership, including Hezbollah, are not interested in changing the current system, and therefore supported a "recovery plan" that was hastily drafted by the cabinet. The plan entails placing the tax burden on the stronger socio-economic levels, but implementation is expected to be difficult. Clearly the public, which continues with the protests, has little faith in the plan. It is difficult to assess whether the protest will ebb soon or lead to the cabinet's resignation or even to anarchy. It seems that Lebanon's salvation can only be achieved with generous foreign aid, preferably from the West and from Gulf states so as to prevent Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, from assuming complete control over the country.

A popular protest erupted in Lebanon on October 17, 2019 on a scale unprecedented in recent years. Mass demonstrations grew steadily stronger in successive days, and have so far numbered between tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of participants as they spread from Beirut to the country's other principal cities. For now, the protests continue. The trigger for the demonstrations – in the sense of "the straw that broke the camel's back" – was an unusual decision (rescinded immediately, one day after the protest erupted) to tax WhatsApp voice calls. This tax was meant to serve as one component in a network of new taxes in the framework of a 2020 budget that the cabinet is trying to advance, as it strives to meet international demands for reform so Lebanon will be eligible to receive \$11 billion in loans for investment in national projects that were pledged at an April 2018 conference in Paris and have yet to be delivered.

The current protest is highly distinctive in its emergence as a spontaneous outpouring bereft of sectarian flavor that has drawn in citizens from all parts of society, and from all faiths and sectors, in a shared call for the resignation of the cabinet and a change of the

current order. Significantly, the demonstrators have directed their calls at all facets of the leadership: the Christian President, Michel Aoun; the Shiite speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri; and the Muslim Prime Minister, Saad al-Hariri. There have also been calls directed against Hezbollah.

This mass protest reflects the despair among the Lebanese public at a difficult economic situation and low living standards; exasperation with a corrupt leadership comprising old elites from all confessional groups that look out only for their own interests; and a dearth of trust in the current government's ability to devise solutions to improve the situation. Protest events have not been free of violence, both by demonstrators (with the burning of tires and disruption of routine life) and by security forces (with the use of tear gas and arrest of demonstrators), yet as the scale of participation has broadened, so have the streets been flooded with Lebanese flag-waving crowds. The protest has become a national celebration evincing hope for better lives. The essence of the protest was captured by a sign waved by one participant, "I fight to live."

Core Reasons for the Protest

Over the past decade, Lebanon's citizens have suffered deteriorating living standards given a worsening economic situation. Lebanon is in a deep economic crisis: its foreign debt is approximately \$85 billion, and it is on the verge of bankruptcy (Fitch recently downgraded Lebanon's credit rating to CCC); Lebanese unemployment is high (young people make up some 36 percent of the unemployed); national infrastructures are run down, and there are serious electricity and water shortages; and national institutions, including the justice system and security apparatus, are tainted by chronic corruption. Lebanon has also suffered consequences from the civil war in Syria, mainly the burden of hosting some 1.5 million Syrian refugees, which together with the "established" Palestinian refugees make up around a quarter of the population.

In parallel, the government apparatus is not functional. Hariri, the Sunni Prime Minister, may have succeeded in forming a "unity government" in early 2019 after a protracted (eight months long) post-election political crisis, but he is hard-put to function and advance decisions because of the composition of the current cabinet, which features an oppositional bloc made up of his rivals: Aoun, who joined forces with Shiite representatives from the Amal movement and Hezbollah organization. Another contributing factor has been Hezbollah's ongoing strength within the Lebanese political system and the organization's ability to influence and paralyze the decision making process in accordance with its interests. Hezbollah's incorporation in the government has also had economic ramifications. On the one hand, it enables Hezbollah to divert the budgets of government ministries under its control for its needs, with the general population bearing the cost, and on the other hand, the impact of sanctions against it,

which have been significantly broadened over the last year, also trickles down to the Lebanese economy. Nevertheless, demonstrators are reluctant to blame the organization, which nowadays constitutes the semi-military force in the country.

The Response by the Leadership

The spontaneous outbreak of the protest drew a quick response from the leadership, which appears to have been frightened by the potential consequences of the events. Preliminary statements by representatives of the various parties suggest that current leaders are eager to preserve the existing order so as not to harm their assets. Prime Minister Hariri was the first to respond publicly: on October 18, a day after the outbreak, he called on his government partners to enable him to fix the situation, while hinting at his possible resignation within 72 hours if they did not cooperate. Nasrallah, for his part, opted for statesmanship, urging the demonstrators in an October 19 speech to act responsibly. Nasrallah explained that a cabinet resignation would worsen the situation rather than solve Lebanon's problems, and called to repair the economic plight. At this stage he has avoided dispatching his operatives to the streets to put down the demonstrations (except for an isolated show of force by Hezbollah men who clashed with Lebanese security personnel on October 21). For his part, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil (President Aoun's son-in-law) argued that the current system represents political consensus and that any change would lead to anarchy.

This convergence of interests to preserve the existing system enabled Prime Minister Hariri to secure speedy cabinet passage on October 20 for a far ranging "recovery plan" that evinces government attentiveness to demonstrators' demands. The plan hinges on shifting the tax burden from the weaker layers of society to the more established and advancing steps for improving the welfare of the population. The plan includes a 50 percent cut in the wages of the senior figures, including past and present ministers and lawmakers; a 25 percent tariff on bank and insurance firm revenues; \$3 billion from the banks earmarked for public benefit projects; dismantlement of unnecessary government ministries; upgrade of the electrical grid; cancellation of planned taxation on the disadvantaged population; and promotion of a plan for guaranteed income for the elderly. Hariri cast the plan as an "economic revolution," yet while it is indeed an ambitious plan, the government can be expected to be hard pressed to implement it.

What Lies Ahead?

At this stage, with the demonstrations continuing, it is hard to assess whether government pledges of deep-set reform will cool temperaments, or if this will prove to be a case of "too little, too late," with persisting protests compelling the cabinet to resign. A cabinet resignation would presumably not augur thorough change, but rather, would lead once more to deadlock and instability within the political system. A more pessimistic view

argues that Lebanon is even liable to fall into a state of anarchy. The possibility of developments along this vector present Hezbollah, which is eager to preserve the current situation that allows it, as a proxy of Iran, to focus on leading the "resistance" against Israel, with the dilemma of whether to resort to force in reining in the demonstrations, a move liable to mire it in problems within the Lebanese sphere and which it presumably wants to avoid entirely. Lebanon can apparently be salvaged only if it secures generous foreign aid for stabilizing its economy, which preferably would come from the West and Gulf states so as to prevent Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, from assuming complete control over the country. As far as Israel is concerned, Hezbollah can be expected to be preoccupied with the internal Lebanese issues in the near term and thus less free to pursue actions against it. But in the longer term, an undermining of internal stability in Lebanon will create risks for Israel, especially if Hezbollah continues to gain strength.