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Lebanon's protest movements of 2015 and 2019: A comparative analysis

Abbas Assi



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Lebanon and Syria

◆◆◆◆◆ About the author

Abbas Assi holds a PhD in international relations from the University of Leeds, UK. The domain of his study is Middle East politics, incorporating the study of the democratization process, Islamic movements, ethnic politics and state formation. He is the author of "Democracy in Lebanon: Political Parties and the Struggle for Power since Syrian Withdrawal" (I.B. Tauris, 2019, 2016 (paperback edition)). Assi also published several academic and newspaper articles and several research reports.

◆◆◆◆◆ Abstract

The 2015 and 2019 protest movements represented a new hope for the Lebanese to reform the political system and combat corruption in state institutions. However, both movements faced obstacles and were not able to obtain their objectives. This research seeks to explore why the civil society movements in Lebanon were not able to exert pressure on the sectarian parties to introduce genuine political and socio-economic reforms and to combat corruption. It will argue that the intersection of internal and external factors led to the failure of the civil society movement in Lebanon. The internal factors involve the inability of the protest movements to develop a clear political and economic program and strategy, and assign a leadership which had impact on their ability to mobilize followers and agree on the organization of protests and strikes. The external factors refer to the sectarian parties which were able to play two main roles to weaken the movements. Firstly, the parties used the state security apparatus and violence to quell the protests. Secondly, they manipulated the movements by supporting them and manipulating their endeavor to reform the political system. In doing so, the sectarian parties aimed to improve their popularity.

Keywords: Lebanon, Sectarianism, Protest, Civil Society Movements, Political Parties, Political and Economic Reforms.

◆◆◆◆◆ Introduction

For the first time in the history of Lebanon, wide popular protests erupted in 2015 and 2019 demanding from the Lebanese political class to introduce genuine political and economic reforms. Tens of thousands of youths went into the streets of Beirut in 2015 after the rubbish clog the streets of the capital due to the failure of the government to find an environment friendly solution to the rubbish crisis. In 2019, the protests erupted after the deterioration of government services, dramatic increase in the inflation rate and collapse of the Lebanese currency. This pushed thousands of Lebanese from all sects to protest in public spaces and squares. It was the first time the protests were dispersed in all Lebanese cities while previously they were mainly concentrated in Beirut. It is noteworthy that the leaders of those protests were not the traditional sectarian leaders. They were Lebanese youths who organized themselves on social media networks and went into the streets after a massive degradation in the government services during the last few years.

The 2015 and 2019 protests were preceded by large protests, though smaller in numbers, in 2011. The developments in several Arab countries since 2011 raised the hopes of peoples across the Arab world to challenge the existing political regimes and push forward democratic reforms. Decades of repression were about to reach an end in 2011. These movements were either composed of repressed political parties which were prohibited from participating in the state institutions and parliamentary elections such as the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt or were civil movements which adopted a piecemeal approach to achieve their objectives¹.

One of the main countries that were affected by these developments is Lebanon. As it is widely known, Lebanon is heavily sensitive to regional and international developments because of the close connections of the Lebanese political parties with regional and international players². Thus, any change in the regional balance of power will be mirrored in Lebanon between the Lebanese parties³. In addition, the civil society movements in the country capitalized on these developments to encourage the Lebanese people to protest against the existing political structure and parties and call for deep structured reforms in the existing political system.

This research aims to provide a comparative analysis of the 2015 and 2019 protest movements. It seeks to explore why the civil society movements in Lebanon were not able to exert pressure on the sectarian parties to combat corruption and to introduce institutional reforms to improve the socio-economic services of the government institutions and genuine political reforms. It will argue that the intersection of internal and external factors led to the failure of the civil society movement in Lebanon. As the following discussion will show, the internal factors involve the inability of the protest movements to develop a clear political and economic program and strategy, and assign a leadership which had impact on their ability to mobilize followers and agree on the organization of protests and strikes. The external factors involve the sectarian parties which were able to play two main roles to weaken the movements. Firstly, the parties used the state security apparatus and violence to quell the protests. Secondly, they manipulated the movements by supporting them and manipulating their endeavor to reform the political system. In doing so, the sectarian parties aimed to improve their popularity. This intersection of internal factors (i.e., absence of leadership, and political and economic program) and external factors (sectarianism and political parties) led to their failure.

This research proceeds as follows. It will firstly explore and discuss the civil society in Lebanon. Secondly, it will proceed in the following two sections to explore and analyze why the protest movements in 2015 and 2019 were not able to achieve their objectives and exert pressure on the political class to combat corruption and introduce institutional reforms.

¹ Farhad Khosrokhavar, "The Civil Sphere and the Arab Spring: On the Universality of Civil Society," in *Solidarity, Justice, and Incorporation: Thinking through the Civil Sphere*, ed. Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Abbas Assi, *Democracy in Lebanon: Political Parties and the Struggle for Power since Syrian Withdrawal* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

³ Ohannes Geukjian, "Political Instability and Conflict after the Syrian Withdrawal from Lebanon," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (2014).

Civil society in Lebanon: an overview

Historically, Lebanon had a vibrant and active civil society. The environment of political freedoms that the country enjoyed since its inception provided a fertile ground for the flourishing of civil society movements and associations. 'About 5,000 CSOs [Civil Society Organizations] are officially registered in Lebanon, with an average of some 200 CSOs established and registered every year. A study carried out in the year 2000 indicated that out of the 5,000 registered CSOs, approximately 700 are active on a regular and sustained basis'⁴. Their activities range from social and economic to cultural and political activities. Many of the existing associations receive external funding since the Lebanese government does not provide financial support on a regular basis⁵. The CSOs in Lebanon are very diverse including ethnic, family and alumni associations, clubs, federations (scouts, youths and student groups), branches of international associations, research centers, religious organizations, political parties, trade unions, and professional associations⁶.

The civil society movement in the country witnessed a prosperous stage. Before the civil war, it was active and accomplished several significant objectives. Karim Pakradouni, former minister and head of the Kataeb Party, argues that 'the popular movements are the ones that can bring about reforms, provided they are solidarity movements and agree on the basic lines of the political program. These movements were absent due to the civil war [because] the students [who composed its main members] joined the militias'⁷. He mentions the formation of the Lebanese University as an example during the sixties and the seventies. He elucidates how the student protests, who were part of it, were instrumental in the formation of the university because the then political class was not convinced of the necessity of forming an official university affordable by all social classes⁸.

The important role of these movements and organizations has made it target for the sectarian political class. CSOs in general are subject to heavy intervention from the sectarian leaders because of their ability to criticize the political parties and to shed light on their role in spreading corruption and clientelism. '[S]ectarian elites use both formal and informal means to infiltrate what can be considered relatively minor civil society organizations (CSOs), thus preventing them from effecting political or socioeconomic change at the national level'⁹. During the protests that erupted in 2011, political elites and party members maneuvered comfortably with the protests with the pretext that they hold the same views toward the sectarian system and the propagation of corruption¹⁰. The infiltration of sectarian leaders was not the only factor that influences the behavior of the CSOs. The international players often provide funding for these organizations on the condition that they adopt policies and views consonant with their political agendas, such as targeting Islamic movements' social milieu¹¹.

Lebanon witnessed a rapid flourishing of civil society movements after the Syrian military withdrawal in 2005¹². During the Syrian period, the political freedoms in the country were severely limited¹³. 'Civic activism under Syrian tutelage was limited in scope and oppression was used in line with the Syrian policy of clamping down on any opposition'¹⁴. This affected the levels of political rights and civil liberties in the country due to the intervention of Syria and its domestic allies in the judiciary and media. The activities of these groups became more intense in

⁴ Khaldoun Abou Assi, "An Assessment of Lebanese Civil Society," (Beirut: CIVICUS, 2006), 26.

⁵ Noteworthy, the civil associations in Lebanon need the approval from the Ministry of Interior to be allowed to practice their activities in the country. According to the Lebanese law, the associations should submit a formal request to the government which will grant them the approval. According to Lebanese legislation, an association is defined by Article 1 of the 1909 Ottoman Law on Associations as 'a group of several persons permanently unifying their knowledge or efforts for non-profit objectives' (Lebanon's Associations Law (9-August, 1909), Article 1.). Some of the prominent CSOs in Lebanon are: Civil Movement for Electoral Reform (CCER), Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), Lebanese Elections Assistance Project (LEAP) and Amel Association which aims to preserving the peaceful coexistence and the promotion of citizenship values.

⁶ Karim El-Mufti, "Civil Society's Role in Security Sector Reform in Lebanon: An Asymmetric Partnership Despite a Growing Working Relationship with Security Services," *International Alert* (2015).

⁷ Interview with Karim Pakradouni, May 4, 2012, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Janine A. Clark and Bassel F. Salloukh, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 4 (2013): 732.

¹⁰ Sami Hermez, "On Dignity and Clientelism: Lebanon in the Context of the 2011 Arab Revolutions," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2011): 530.

¹¹ Ozlem Altan-Olcay and Ahmet Icduygu, "Mapping Civil Society in the Middle East: The Cases of Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012).

¹² Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 120-22.

¹³ Ersun N. Kurtulus, "The Cedar Revolution: Lebanese Independence and the Question of Collective Self-Determination," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009); Rola El-Husseini, *Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Carmen Geha, *Civil Society and Political Reform in Lebanon and Libya: Transition and Constraint* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 79.

post-2005 period and in particular after the eruption of the Arab Revolutions.

After the Syrian withdrawal, the civil society movement in Lebanon witnessed three main milestones in 2011¹⁵, 2015 and 2019¹⁶. At the beginning of 2011, the Arab Revolutions erupted and set in motion a series of consecutive events, beginning with the toppling of the Tunisian regime of Ben Ali and the ongoing Syrian conflict. The eruption of the Arab Revolutions and their success in toppling the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia sparked wide popular protests in Lebanon calling for reforming the existing sectarian system. Bassel Abdullah, a leader in the Civil Society Movement party who was an active participant in the protests, argues that the protests in the Arab world prompted Lebanese youth to protest against the sectarian political system¹⁷. They considered it as an opportunity to rekindle the civil movement and its call to reform state institutions. However, the protests did not last for too long. Its retrogression was because of the internal divisions between the leaders of the protests over the Syrian conflict and its implications on the country, especially after it took a violent trajectory¹⁸. Another factor contributed to its failure was the slogan that the protestors raised 'The People Want to Topple the Sectarian System' which is far-fetched and it is not appealing to a large portion of Lebanese because it threatens the interests of their sectarian groups in the political system¹⁹.

The Lebanese economist, Kamal Hamdan, argues that the recent civil society movement in Lebanon was the first genuine attempt to reform the political system²⁰. He argues that the eruption of the civil society movement protests in the country was 'a result of the failure of the government to carry out its basic functions, i.e., building public facilities, transportation infrastructure and services, redistributing parts of income through tax policies, establishing social safety nets, retirement and health protection systems, education and housing'²¹. The Lebanese sociologist, Ahmad Baydoun, accentuates the importance of Lebanon's civil movement: 'There are seeds for the formation of cross-sectarian forces such as civil forces. The development of these forces and their ability to harvest the support of the sects could lead to the opening of the horizon for a political solution [i.e., political reform]'²².

The protest movement of 2015

Four years after the 2011 protests, the rubbish crisis and its implications rekindled once again the civil movement in the country. The closure of the Naameh landfill in July 2015 which was used to hold the rubbish of the capital and its suburbs without providing an alternative plan led to the rubbish to clog the streets²³. The accumulation of the waste on the streets with its environmental and health hazards prompted the public to protest and form several civil movements to exert pressure on the government, such as 'You Stink' and 'We Want Accountability' movements²⁴. At later stages of their formation, they did not only call on the government to develop an environment friendly plan to the rubbish crisis, they also demanded reforming the political system and adopting a new electoral law and run the parliamentary elections on time²⁵. The parliamentary elections were postponed twice since it was supposed to be held in the Spring of 2013. However, the government did not organize the elections until

¹⁵ Meris Lutz, "Lebanon: Thousands Rally against Sectarian Leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20 2011.

¹⁶ The protests in 2015 and 2019 are covered in this research because of their similarities in terms of their sizes, implications and the support that they enjoyed from all sects.

¹⁷ Interview with Bassel Abdullah, July 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

¹⁸ Interview with Asaad Thebian, from the 'You Stink' movement, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

¹⁹ Group interview with Wasef Al-Harakah, Hadi Mounla, George Azar and Ilham Moubark from 'We Want Accountability' movement, June 25, 2018, Beirut Lebanon.

²⁰ Nidal Dawoud, "Al-Khabīr Al-īqtisādī Dr. Kamal Hamdan: 'dam Nuduj Al-Wa'i Qad Yuhauwwal Al-hrāk 'ilā Fawdā [the Economist Dr. Kamal Hamdan: The Immaturity of Consciousness May Turn the Movement into Chaos]," *Anbaa Online Newspaper*, December 1 2015.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview with Ahmad Baydoun, April 21, 2012, Beirut, Lebanon.

²³ The Naameh landfill was closed because the inhabitants of the Naameh area complained about its environmental and health hazards.

²⁴ According to the corruption perceptions index published by Transparency International, Lebanon was ranked 149 out of 180 countries. Transparency International, "Lebanon," Transparency International Organization, available on: <https://www.transparency.org/country/LBN>.

²⁵ Gaja Pellegrini-Bettoli, "Lebanese Activists Raise a Stink About Trash Crisis, Government Paralysis," *Al-Monitor*, November 3 2015.

2018, after the sectarian parties agreed on a new electoral law²⁶.

The rubbish crisis coupled with a vacant presidential position and caretaker government prompted several youth figures active on social media (Facebook and Twitter) to organize themselves and protest against the government²⁷. Bassel Abdullah argues that the people in 2015 protested with large numbers than 2011 because the rubbish crisis is a personal concern of every Lebanese citizen²⁸. Asaad Thebian elucidates how the 'You Stink' movement born. At the early stages of the protests in 2015, it was not yet formed²⁹. After few days of protesting they called themselves 'You Stink' movement in reference to the inability of the government to collect the rubbish from the streets, which publicly appeared in July 2015. In addition to the 'You Stink' movement, several movements and parties emerged and participated in the 2015 protests. They are very diverse and include members from the left and right wings. Bassel Abdullah sheds light on the secular students' movement which used to organize regular meetings under the auspices of the Civil Society Movement party, one of the first parties to participate in the protests³⁰. The Youth Movement for Change was also an active participant in the protests. It is founded by Communists who were separated from the Lebanese Communist party in 2015. It participated in the civil society movements and protests in 2015 and was part of 'We Want Accountability' movement³¹. Nevertheless, the lawyer and activist, Hasan Bazzi, also claims that he was the first person to call for protesting when the rubbish started piling on the streets³².

The 2015 protest movement was able to achieve some limited objectives. For instance, it was the first time in the history of the country that the Lebanese political class approves the formation of a new ministry to combat corruption and ministry of woman affairs in the former government of Saad Hariri (2018-19)³³. In addition, the political parties strikingly raised the issue of corruption and how to combat it³⁴. Najib Mikati, former PM and Sunni figure from Tripoli, submitted to the parliament a draft law to cut down the salaries and quit retirement pensions of the Lebanese MPs³⁵. The protest movement was able to expose the corruption in the government plan to solve the rubbish crisis. The Lebanese government declared that it will export the rubbish to Russia and signed a \$600 million contract with a company called Shinok and it paid \$10 million as a first installment. Hani Fayyad and Ahmad Hellani, both from 'We Want Accountability' movement, discovered after they contacted the Russian Ministry of Environment that it is a fake company and does not exist³⁶. There was an implicit agreement between Lebanese politicians that the government will pay the full contract to Shinok and they will distribute the financial returns among them. Thus, they organized a press conference and exposed the scandal which eventually forced the government to cancel the contract.

Nonetheless, the protest movement in 2015 was not able to achieve significant victories against the governing political class, including a new electoral law or the elimination of sectarianism. As the discussion below will show, the protest leaders were not able to take advantage of the massive protests that erupted in August 2015 to exert pressure on the political class to initiate genuine political and economic reforms. In terms of elections, the civil society movements faced setbacks. Although they were able to win the Engineering Syndicate elections in 2017 and Beirut Order of Engineers position³⁷, they were not able to win the municipality elections and run the parliamentary elections in one electoral list.

In the 2016 municipality elections, the protest movement was not able to win the municipality elections in the capital and in general across Lebanon. Although the hegemony of the Future Movement, the main Sunni party,

over the municipality in Beirut was shaken for the first time since the 1990s³⁸ because the civil society movement was able to gain high percentage of votes (40%)³⁹, it was not able to defeat the sectarian parties electoral list.

In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the civil society movement had 66 parliamentary candidates all over Lebanon and ran in two electoral lists. It was divided along political lines which reflected their contradictory political visions and had impact on their ability to mobilize followers. The first list was in Beirut first electoral district named 'We Are All Patriots' (Kullana Watani) composed from 'You Stink' movement and right-wing groups while the second electoral list in Beirut second electoral district named 'Voice of People', composed of leftists and 'We Want Accountability' movement. One candidate was able to win the elections, Paula Yacoubian, from Beirut first electoral district. Yacoubian is known for her close relations with the political class since she used to work in the Future Movement Television. The lawyer and activist, Wasef Al-Harakah, does not deny the fact that the 'We Are All Patriots' electoral list included figures close to the governing coalition⁴⁰.

The failure of the protest movement to win the elections can be explained with its internal weaknesses and the manipulation of the sectarian parties. Firstly, the absence of a unified electoral list can be explained with their inability to have an organizational framework⁴¹. Hassan Bazzi argues that the absence of a unified ideological vision toward the enmity against Israel and the Resistance contributed to the schism within the protest movement and the formation of two groups: 'You Stink' and 'We Want Accountability'⁴². Asaad Thebian admits that he was a proponent of discussing all conflicting issues and develop a clear vision of the future political system⁴³. Ali Hammoud argues that there was a disagreement between the groups from the beginning. There were ideological divisions regarding political orientations and regional conflicts, such as the Syrian conflict⁴⁴.

Secondly, raising far-fetched slogans such as toppling the sectarian system sparked the fears of some Lebanese groups in particular the Christians who are afraid about their minority status in case sectarianism is eliminated. Al-Arabi Al-Andari, an activist in the civil movement and member in the Democratic Youth Union, argues that 'some [protest leaders] preferred to focus on the rubbish crisis, while others saw the crisis as an opportunity to carry broader slogans and demands, and reached the point of demanding the overthrow of the [sectarian] regime'⁴⁵. 'Although many Lebanese show dissatisfaction with the sectarian nature of the political regime, their perceptions of the path toward political change in Lebanon remain diverse'⁴⁶. Thirdly, it did not develop a unified strategy to face the pervasiveness of corruption. Hassan Bazzi differentiates between a strategy to face corruption and a strategy to face the political parties⁴⁷. The former enjoys wide agreement between the Lebanese while the latter might lead to a division and lose some of its popularity because of sectarianism. Some of the protest leaders were proponents of naming the corrupt politicians and accusing them of corruption which was antipathetic to many Lebanese because of sectarianism and not all politicians are corrupt⁴⁸.

Fourthly, there was a lack of trust between the groups. The leftists accused the right-wing groups of being funded from outside, in particular the US, and the right-wing groups considered that the left is in general demised, unorganized and extremist⁴⁹. Fifthly, the abrupt emergence of some political parties and parliamentary candidates who were not part of the protest movement had impact on their ability to form coherent and credible electoral lists. Bassel Abdullah was surprised with the rise of Sabaa Party immediately before the parliamentary elections with candidates from the media industry with huge funding⁵⁰ Ahmad Hellani confirms the same point that figures like Paula Yacoubian and Raghida Durgham were not part of the protest movement and sought to

²⁶ Abdullah Abu-Habib, "Postponing Lebanon's Elections Assures Political Chaos," *Al-Monitor*, available on: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/05/lebanon-extension-parliament-elections-politics.html>; Antoine Ghattas Saab, "West Fears Postponement of Lebanon's Elections," *The Daily Star*, May 28 2013; Abbas Assi and James Worrall, "Stable Instability: The Syrian Conflict and the Postponement of the 2013 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 10 (2015).

²⁷ The presidential position was vacant for about two years from 2014 until 2016, after the presidential term of Michel Suleiman ended and the political class was not able to agree on a new president until late 2016.

²⁸ Interview with Bassel Abdullah, July 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

²⁹ Interview with Asaad Thebian, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

³⁰ Interview with Bassel Abdullah, July 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

³¹ Group interview with Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hotiet, members in the political committee of the Youth Movement for Change, July 5, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

³² Interview with Hasan Bazzi, March 14, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

³³ Interview with Asaad Thebian, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Said Tanouis, "Najib Mikati: Yaqtarah Mashrū' Qānūn Yan'kas 'layhī Salbīn [Najib Miqati Proposes a Bill That Reflects Negatively on His Interest]," *Russia Today Online*, available on: https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/934980-#رئيس_حكومة_لبناني_أسبق_يقترح_قطع_رُزقه_ورزق_زملاته_ونظرائه_أجمعين.

³⁶ Interview with Hani Fayyad, from 'We Want Accountability' movement, April 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon. Interview with Ahmad Hellani, from 'We Want Accountability' movement, March 6, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

³⁷ *The Daily Star*, "Jad Tabet Wins Beirut Order of Engineers Polls," *The Daily Star*, April 8 2017.

³⁸ Nada Abdel-Samad, "Intikhabāt Beirut: Taghūyyor Al-Mazāj Al-Sha'by [the Municipality Elections of Beirut: A Change in the Public Mood]," 2016; Venetia Rainey, "Lebanon: Civil Groups Seek Change in Local Elections," 2016.

³⁹ Bachir el-Khoury, "Lebanon's Civil Society Groups Gear up for 2018 Elections," *Al-Monitor*, June 19 2017.

⁴⁰ Group interview with Wasef Al-Harakah, Hadi Mounla, George Azar and Ilham Moubark from 'We Want Accountability' movement, June 25, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview with Hasan Bazzi, March 14, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴³ Interview with Asaad Thebian, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴⁴ Group interview with Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hotiet, July 5, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴⁵ Yara Nahle, "Arabi Al-Andari: Lam Nakun Badilān Jaddiāin [We Were Not an Earnest Alternative]," *Al-Modon Online*, July 23 2016.

⁴⁶ Tamirace Fakhoury, "Do Power-Sharing Systems Behave Differently Amid Regional Uprisings?: Lebanon in the Arab Protest Wave," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (2014): 514.

⁴⁷ Interview with Hasan Bazzi, March 14, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴⁸ Group interview with Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hotiet, July 5, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁴⁹ Group interview with Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hotiet, July 5, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵⁰ Interview with Bassel Abdullah, July 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

run the elections in protest movement electoral list⁵¹. Hellani considered that these figures are close allies to the political class and the US and this run against their positions toward Tel Aviv and Washington. He admits that they were suspicious of people who were working with the US Embassy in Beirut and sought to distance them from the civil movement⁵². Sixthly, the absence of funding had impact on the ability of the protest movement to win the elections. Asaad Thebian argues that one of the factors that contributed to their weaknesses in the elections was the lack of funding. The media outlets conditioned their invitation upon the payment of \$30,000 for 30 minutes interview⁵³. Seventhly, Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hoteit stress the point that personal ambitions, such as the endeavor of some protest leaders to show off on media outlets and unilaterally lead the protests, had impact on the popularity of the protest movement and on the coordination between the groups⁵⁴.

On their turn, the sectarian parties employed several approaches to weaken the protest movement and this had impact on the momentum of the protests and their ability to obtain their objectives. Firstly, they used the state security forces to quell the protestors and attempted to sue the protest leaders. Amnesty International reported that '[a]t least 343 people were treated for injuries and 59 more were hospitalized, according to the Red Cross, after protests on 22 and 23 August organized by the local "You Stink" civil society movement'⁵⁵. Hamoud and Hoteit assert the same point that the state authorities reverted to violence to quell the protests⁵⁶. Hani Fayyad claims that many businessmen and figures close to the political class and the Ministry of Environment sued him because of his attempts to expose their corruption⁵⁷.

Secondly, they raised their fears about suicide bombs targeting the protests. Jumblatt warned the protestors of ISIS danger which might commit suicide bombs in the protests⁵⁸. The Lebanese General Security issued a statement warning that the protests might include members from al-Qaeda⁵⁹. Thebian denies these accusations and considered that they were fabricated to weaken the momentum of the protests and he accused the ruling parties of sending their thugs to assault the protestors⁶⁰. Thirdly, some of the sectarian parties attempted to join the protests and raised their demands in an attempt to improve their popularity. Kataeb Party whose popularity declined significantly in recent years sought to join the protests. It participated in a protest denouncing the imposition of new taxes on middle and poor classes⁶¹. Fourthly, the sectarian parties sought to attract figures from the protest movement to join its electoral list, like Elfat Sabaa and Naameh Mahfoud⁶². Sabaa, an academic and member in the protest movement, joined the electoral list of Kataeb Party while Mahfoud who was head of the Private Schools Teachers Syndicate and staunch opponent of the ruling class, joined the electoral list of the Future Movement in the north.

The protest movement of 2019

The 2019 protests erupted on October 17 after it was circulated that the government intended to impose a \$6 tax on the WhatsApp application service. Although the government revoked its decision, the protests did not end. There were several other factors that sparked the protests including high inflation rates, collapse of the Lebanese

⁵¹ Interview with Ahmad Hellani, March 6, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Interview with Asaad Thebian, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵⁴ Group interview with Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hotiet, July 5, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵⁵ Amnesty International, "Lebanon: Security Forces Using Excessive Force against Protestors Must Be Held to Account," *Amnesty International*, August 29 2015.

⁵⁶ Group interview with Ali Hamoud and Muhammad Hotiet, July 5, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵⁷ Interview with Hani Fayyad, April 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Interview with Asaad Thebian, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Caroline Akkoun, "The Public Protests Return Back to Beirut against Tax Increase [Al-Muzāhrāt Al-Sha'biyya Ta'ud 'ilā Beirut Tahat 'ounwān Rafd Zayādāt Al-Darā'ib]," *Al-Sharek -Al-Awsat*, March 20 2017.

⁶² Interview with Hani Fayyad, April 4, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

currency which is pegged to US dollar, and weak government economic and social services. While the 2015 protests were limited in space and time, the 2019 protests were diffused in all districts and since October 2019, the country witnessed intermittent protests. As the discussion below will show, the movement suffered from internal weaknesses, and maneuvering and manipulation of sectarian parties in an attempt to steer the protests to serve their interests.

During the 2019 protests, several civil society movements emerged which were not known before October 17. It is notable that the majority of the movements that participated in the 2015 protests were not active in the 2019 protests. The 'You Stink' and 'We Want Accountability' movements were not leading the protests⁶³. Tens of groups and movements participated in the protests, like Bank Youth Group, the Citizens in a State party founded and headed by the former minister Charbel Nahhas, defected members from Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Kafeh Movement, Lihaggi, The Youth Movement for Change, National Bloc, Beirut Madinati, Lebanese Communist Party, New Lebanese Party, Sabaa Party, Retired Army Soldiers Movement, Al-Bekaa Youth Movement, and National Coalition.

The 2019 protests achieved limited goals. The most evident was its ability to force Saad Hariri's government to resign after two weeks of the protests and form a new government from non-partisan members which was the first government of its kind since the end of the civil war in 1990. The independent Hassan Diab was able to form the new government on January 2020 which was composed of independents, including for the first time six women, named by the March 8 Coalition parties⁶⁴. The civil society movements rejected to participate in the new cabinet and considered that it is part of the ruling political class and does not represent the protestors, although the President Michel Aoun called on them to form a delegation to negotiate with him their participation in the new cabinet.

The protest movement failed to achieve its objectives so far. For instance, it failed to impose on the government to restructure its national debt which is at 170% of GDP⁶⁵, the third highest national debt to GDP in the world. Also, the protest movement failed to have influence on the formulation of the government financial plan to reform the banking sector, central bank, state financial policies and administrations⁶⁶. which is the first of its kind since the end of the civil war. The financial plan is not yet implemented because of the political class attempt to foil it.

Furthermore, the protest movement failed to prosecute the governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon (CBL), although the governor of CBL, Riad Salameh, had been heavily criticized by the protestors because of his erroneous fiscal and monetary policies, and providing low interest loans to politicians and media outlets to cover his failed and corrupt policies⁶⁷. Several small protests were organized next to the CBL in Hamra compared to the large protests organized in Downtown Beirut⁶⁸. The organizers of the CBL protests accused the leaders of the protests in Downtown Beirut of having a political agenda and attempting to avoid their criticism against CBL and Salameh although it is blamed for the collapse of the Lebanese currency.

One of the approaches to investigate the CBL and Salameh policies is to initiate the process of the financial forensic audit which the protest movement failed so far to impose it on the ruling class. The financial forensic audit did not reach a conclusion yet because the political class is stalling its process. Although the government signed an agreement with the consultancy company, Alvarez & Marsal, to conduct the financial auditing of the CBL accounts, Salameh rejected the collaboration with the company with the pretext that the contract runs against the

⁶³ 'We Want Accountability' movement is not active on Facebook since March 2018. Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/BadnaHaseb>, viewed on: 13-2-2021.

⁶⁴ The March 4 Coalition is a pro-Hezbollah coalition which won the majority of parliamentary seats in 2018 elections. The March 14 Coalition was formed after the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri in 2005. It stood against Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. For a further and deep discussion about the divisions that Lebanon witnessed since 2005 see: Assi, *Democracy in Lebanon: Political Parties and the Struggle for Power since Syrian Withdrawal*.

⁶⁵ DW, "Lebanon to Default on Debt Amid Financial Unrest," *Deutsche Welle*, March 3 2020.

⁶⁶ PCM, "Address by He Prime Minister Hassan Diab Announcing the Government's Financial Plan," President Council of Ministers Office, available on: <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/Library/Files/Address%20of%20PM%20Hassan%20Diab%20April%2030%202020.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Hicham Safieddine, "Masrif Hākim Lubnān: Al-Hayba Wa Al-Haymana [the Bank of Lebanon's Governor: Prestige and Dominance]," *Al-Akhbar*, October 28 2019.

⁶⁸ I participated in the protests next to CBL which were mainly organized by leftists. The media played an influential role in the protests. Due to the relationship between the media industry in Lebanon and the political class, it was eclectic in its coverage of the protests and the hosting of protest leaders. It sought to defend the CBL and its governor and divert the public attention against Hezbollah and FPM.

banking secrecy law in Lebanon⁶⁹. Thus, the Lebanese parliament passed a law in December, 2020, 'to lift banking secrecy for one year in a move that could clear the way for a forensic audit of the central bank, a key condition for foreign aid that has hit a roadblock'⁷⁰. The protest movement also failed to force the parliament to legislate capital control to stop the smuggling of foreign currency from the country. It is rumored that the Lebanese politicians smuggled billions of dollars outside the country after the October protests.

Further to the abovementioned failures, the protest movement failed to take advantage of the implications of Beirut Sea Port explosion to exert pressure on the ruling class. The Beirut Sea Port explosion on August 4, 2020, caused the death of about 200, maiming thousands, and damage worth of about \$4.6 billion. It was due to the existence of about 2,750 kg of explosive ammonium in one of its depots for about six years. The explosive material was left in the sea port without basic safety measures⁷¹. A large protest was organized in Downtown Beirut on August 8 against the political class recklessness. The implications of the explosion led eventually to the resignation of Diab cabinet in August 2020. Ironically, Saad Hariri who was forced to resign after October protests was renamed once again as designated PM⁷². Since the resignation of Diab in August the political class was not able to form a new government although the inflation rate is increasing dramatically and the Coronavirus pandemic left significant implications on the health and economic sectors. Noticeable, the protest movement had no influence on the nomination of the designated PM and was not able to accelerate the investigations of the sea port explosion which did not reach an end yet⁷³.

The above failures can be explained with the 2019 protest movement internal weaknesses. Firstly, the withdrawal of the Shia from the protests was detrimental to the movement and its ability to achieve its objectives. It also undermined its credibility as a cross-sectarian movement. During the first week of the protests in October 2019, Hezbollah expressed its cautious support to the movement and it warned the protestors of foreign intervention in the protests and the manipulation of sectarian parties. However, the party changed its position and called on its supporters to withdraw from the protests. Hezbollah justified its position by claiming that there are parties which are attempting to divert the protests and pit the protestors against the supporters of the Resistance to spark sectarian agitations. The party decision came after the clashes erupted between party supporters and protestors over the latter accusation of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah of being corrupt. The Shia overwhelmingly complied with its decision.

Secondly, the absence of a strategy on how to deal with the political class had a retroaction impact on the protest movement. The protest leaders rejected the negotiation with the political class and demanded its resignation without providing alternatives. This decision had detrimental effects on the movement. The current political class is still dominating the parliament and government, and constitutionally it is the only party that is able to form the government and elect the president. The rejection of the protest leaders to negotiate with the political class led eventually to their exclusion from Diab cabinet and thus overseeing the government policies and its earnest to implement reform policies⁷⁴.

Thirdly, the absence of a unified leadership of the protest movement with a political and economic program have weakened its political position and made it prone to sectarian manipulation. The groups and parties that organized the protests eschewed the formation of a leadership in fear of the eruption of divisions between the protestors⁷⁵. Like the 2015 protest movement, they had divisions on essential issues. At the political level, they

⁶⁹ Reuters Staff, "Lebanese Parliament Agrees to Lift Banking Secrecy for One Year," *Reuters*, December 21 2020.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Abbas Assi, "Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising," *Insight (Middle East Institute - NUS)*, December 15 2020, 3-5.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ The implications of the Coronavirus pandemic on the movement were detrimental and they affected its ability to secure the sustainability of the protests. Although the pandemic worsened further the economic and social conditions of the Lebanese, the protest movement was not able to organize new protests and sit-ins. The only major protest organized during the pandemic was on August 8 denouncing the Beirut Sea Port explosion and was not up to the expectations of the leaders of the protest movement because of its small number. Although the explosion left devastating impacts, the Lebanese people was not enthusiastic to participate in the protest because of their fears of the pandemic and their disappointment from the protest leaders to assign a unified leadership and develop its political and economic program.

⁷⁴ Abbas Assi, "Lebanon's Protest Movement Needs New Strategy to Keep People's Support," *The Globe Post* 2020.

⁷⁵ One of the panel discussions which I attended organized by leftists in Downtown Beirut was canceled because of the attempt of Future Movement supporters to interrupt it. The panel discussion was aimed to discuss the corrupt policies of former PM Rafik Hariri by the journalist Radwan Mortada. The intervention of Future Movement protestors led the security forces to interfere and ask the organizers to cancel it. There were fears that it might morph into violence.

disagreed on the legitimacy of the Resistance, Hezbollah's armed wing, the relations with Damascus, the status of Syrian refugees, and the elimination of sectarianism. At the economic level, they had divisions regarding the economic policies (neoliberal policies, privatization, etc.), the role of central bank and the banking sector. The absence of a unified leadership opened the doors for external manipulation. For instance, the absence of a clear decision from the protest leaders regarding road blocking led the sectarian parties to organize road blocking under the name of the protestors to exert pressure on their opponents. What augmented the people's anger is that road blocking worsened further the economic conditions and witnessed intermittent violent conflicts between the protestors and the citizens.

What further increased the doubts of the protestors is that the majority of the abovementioned groups and parties are not popular and there are doubts about their funding. These groups sought to speak on behalf of the protestors. The majority of the above movements were not known for the Lebanese and they started to mushroom during the protests. They provided limited information about themselves to the public. In Downtown Beirut, the civil society movements organized panel discussions with modest equipment, except for some movements, like Sabaa Party, which was able to install a large podium equipped with lighting and audio systems. Such expensive equipment brought by a new and nascent party raised the doubts of the Lebanese about its goals from participating in the protests. As mentioned above, Bassel Abdullah raised doubts about Sabaa Party and its financial sources.

The sectarian parties on their turn sought to manipulate the protest movement and directed it against their opponents. Hariri's resignation after the October protests was not solely aimed to comply with the protestors' demands. He, however, sought to improve his popularity within the Sunni community and to join the opposition because the Future Movement and its March 14 Coalition allies are a minority in the parliament and cabinet⁷⁶. By his resignation, he sought to isolate the governing coalition in the face of protestors, in particular FPM and Hezbollah⁷⁷. In addition to Saad Hariri's resignation and bid to improve his popularity, the Lebanese Forces Party (LFP) and Kataeb parties called on their supporters to participate in the protests without raising party chants⁷⁸. Their supporters played an essential role in the protests and road blocking in Jal Al Dib area, northern Beirut. The position of those two Maronite parties can be explained with their bid to topple, or at least weaken, the FPM and its leader, the current president Michel Aoun, especially as the people's anger was heavily directed against Jubran Bassil, Aoun's son-in-law. The Druze leader Walid Jumblatt also sought to manipulate it and levelled heavy criticism against the governing coalition in an attempt to absorb the Druze community anger and frustration from the ruling elites' failure to improve the economic conditions⁷⁹. In addition, the deteriorating economic conditions usually compel the Lebanese to revert to their sectarian leaders for economic and social services⁸⁰. This dissuaded many Lebanese citizens from participating in the protests.

After the sea port explosion, several MPs resigned in protest in an attempt to increase their popularity after its deterioration since October 2019. Their resignation was not welcomed by the protestors. For instance, the deputies Paula Yacoubian, Marwan Hamada, a member in the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), defected deputies from the FPM, and the Kataeb Party MPs, resigned. However, their resignation was not widely welcomed by the protestors because Yacoubian has close connections with the Future Movement and the political class in general, and the rest of the resigned deputies are part of the ruling class. The LFP expressed its intention to resign from

⁷⁶ Assi, "Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising."

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ ICG, "Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit," (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020), 3-4. Kareem Chehayeb, "Army and Protesters Face Off over Roadblocks as Lebanon Continues to Boil," *Middle East Eye*, October 23 2019.

⁷⁹ Maysam Rizk, "Jumblatt: Muntafidon 'ala 'Ssulta'... Wa Al-Intifāda [Jumblatt: We Are Uprising against Political Authority... And Intifada]," *Al-Akhbar*, October 17 2020.

⁸⁰ LCPS, "Why Did the October 17 Revolution Witness a Regression in Numbers?," *Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*(2020), available on: <http://lcps-lebanon.org/agendaArticle.php?id=199>.

the parliament in case its March 14 Coalition allies resigned in an attempt to outbid its opponents and allies.

An evident case study of the impact of the lockdown on the economic conditions and the manipulation of the sectarian elites and parties was Tripoli protests in 2021. During the lockdown caused by the spread of Coronavirus in January 2021, Tripoli witnessed another round of protests against the government policies causing the death of one of the protestors⁸¹. The pandemic worsened further the economic and social conditions in the disenfranchised city. According to Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) study on Poverty in Tripoli which was prepared in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs, 'Tripoli is in general a poor city, with some "pockets of luxury". Of the city's residents, 57 per cent are deprived, and of these, 26 percent are extremely deprived, while 77 per cent are deprived in terms of the economic status factor, whereas 35 percent are deprived in terms of accommodation, 35 per cent in terms of health and 25 per cent in terms of education'⁸². The pervasiveness of poverty in the city provided a fertile ground for the protest movement.

The absence of a powerful Sunni leadership since the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri in 2005 had left deep implications on the community and their anger toward the political class, in particular in Tripoli, which is overwhelmingly Sunni⁸³. In a multi-sectarian society like the Lebanese society, a sect without a unified and robust leadership could create a sense of weakness and vulnerability and inculcate the sense of insecurity. The importance of the leadership is that it is able to advance the interests of the sect while the existence of several weak leaders might lead them to compromise community interests. The Sunnis feel deprived and oppressed since their inter-sectarian opponents like the Shia has a unified leadership (Hezbollah-Amal Movement alliance) and able to impose its policies⁸⁴. The Lebanese sociologist Ahmad Baydoun, calls this behavior 'mirror language'⁸⁵. The failure of Saad Hariri to lead the Sunnis and improve their social and economic conditions led to the retrogression of his popularity. Another factor that contributed to their anger against Saad Hariri was his compromise with the most popular Maronite leader, Michel Aoun, which involved the nomination of Aoun to the presidency position in 2016 and Hariri to PM⁸⁶. This compromise rekindled the old Sunni-Maronite conflict over state executive policies between the Maronite president and Sunni PM. The forced resignation of Saad Hariri after the eruption of the protests on October 17, 2019, inculcated further this sense of oppression and injustice. While Aoun and Nabih Berri, Speaker of Parliament, did not resign, Hariri, the main Sunni leader, was forced to resign to comply with the protestors' demands⁸⁷.

It is noticeable that the protests in Tripoli were manipulated by political parties. It is rumored that the protests erupted in Tripoli because of the conflict between Saad Hariri and his eldest brother, Bahaa, over the leadership of the community⁸⁸. Saad Hariri accused parties in sparking Tripoli protests which are seeking to advance their interests at the expense of the people's grievances. Ahmad Fatfat, a former MP for the Future Movement, claims that 'other parties have entered the game and are trying to politically take advantage of the disturbances to undermine Hariri in the city'⁸⁹. The former PM Najib Mikati from Tripoli expressed his concerns that 'it is clear that certain parties are inciting people to take to the streets to make political gains'⁹⁰. Bahaa is seeking to play a political role by manipulating the protest movement. He is attempting to depose his brother Saad from the leadership of the community and the Future Movement. He is adopting an 'opportunistic approach' through manipulating the failures of his brother to improve his community socio-economic conditions and outbidding him regarding

⁸¹ France24, "Clashes over Lockdowns, Inequality Escalate in Lebanon's Tripoli after Protester's Death," *France24*, January 29 2021.

⁸² Adib Naameh, "Poverty in Tripoli," (Beirut: Economic and Social Commission in Western Asia, 2015).

⁸³ For an analysis of the 2019 protest movement from a sectarian perspective see: Assi, "Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising."

⁸⁴ Mounir Rabih, "In the Face of Tripoli's Anger, Sunni Leaders Are Confronting a Community at Unease," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, February 02 2021.

⁸⁵ Interview with Ahmad Baydoun, April 21, 2012, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁸⁶ Hussein Dakroub, "Aoun: My Political Pact with Hariri Remains Intact," *The Daily Star*, August 6 2018.

⁸⁷ Assi, "Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising," 3.

⁸⁸ Kassem Marwani, "Hal Ta'khudh 'zmat Träblus Shakl Al-Sirä' Al-Musallah? [Does Tripoli Crisis Morph into a Violent Conflict?]," *Al Modon*, January 28 2021.

⁸⁹ Rabih, "In the Face of Tripoli's Anger, Sunni Leaders Are Confronting a Community at Unease."

⁹⁰ Ibid.

his relations with Hezbollah which he accuses of assassinating his father in 2005. He portrays himself as an honest politician and alternative to the existing political class. In his political statement published last May, Bahaa considered that after the end of the Coronavirus pandemic, the corrupt political class will return to govern the country which used sectarian language to 'steal our country's capabilities'⁹¹. He stated that '[t]here is no strong, responsible, honest or economically robust state to shoulder the burden of inspiring activity across the country'⁹². Bahaa supported 'the rightful demands' of 'the people's revolution against the system of corruption and illegal weapons'⁹³. He indirectly criticized his brother, Saad, by stating that 'we will be quiet about your arms [in reference to Hezbollah's armed wing] and your party's violation of national sovereignty, if you are quiet about our deals and theft of public money'.

◆◆◆◆◆ Conclusion

Given the nature of the Lebanese sectarian system and its robust and interwoven relations with the sectarian groups, the emergence of a civil society movement which can challenge the traditional sectarian political parties is considered a breakthrough. The civil society movement was able to represent a menace for the political class, probably for the first time in the history of the country. Following the protests in August 2015, Nabih Berri admitted that '[t]here would have been a revolution in Lebanon against the failures of the state if it were not for the country's sectarian nature'⁹⁴.

However, both protest movements (2015 and 2019) did not attain significant achievements that can change the country political process. They were not able, for instance, to: 1) force the ruling class to formulate a new electoral law that is able to produce a new political class; 2) legislate capital control law to prevent the smuggling of the country foreign currency reserves; 3) prosecute the CBL and its governor although they are blamed for the currency collapse; 4) and initiate financial forensic audit due to the obstruction from the ruling class. The 2015 and 2019 protest movements faced several internal weaknesses: ideological divisions, lack of coordination and strategy to deal with the ruling class and leadership, and absence of political and economic programs.

These weaknesses were manipulated by the sectarian parties. They followed two main approaches to undermine the protest movement. Firstly, they sought to face the movement through employing the state security apparatus and violence to quell the protestors and dismantle their movement. There were fears among the movement leaders that their conflict with the state authority might cause bloodshed which many of them rejected and hesitated to go further with their conflict with the ruling class⁹⁵. Secondly, the sectarian parties adopted cooptation to tame the movement through manipulating its objectives. The Kataeb Party is an evident example which sought to improve its popularity by participating in the protests, although it is one of the oldest sectarian parties in the country and participated in the Lebanese civil war (1975-90).

Nevertheless, the prospects of the protest movement to achieve its objectives are still high if it assigns a unified leadership, organizes itself and develops a clear political and economic program. The protest movement

⁹¹ Najia Houssari, "Tension in Lebanon over 'Political Comeback' by Hariri Brother," *Arab News*, May 11 2020.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ The Daily Star, "Sectarianism Pacifies Popular Revolt: Berri," *The Daily Star*, August 22 2015.

⁹⁵ Interview with Hassan Bazzi, March 14, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon. Interview with Asaad Thebian, March 28, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

can capitalize on the people's anger due to the continuous increase in the inflation rate and the devaluation of the Lebanese currency. The ability of the political class to solve the economic and financial crisis in the foreseeable future are bleak. The banking sector lost the trust of the Lebanese, the CBL reserves of foreign currency are decreasing and the prices of basic products, like bread, fuel and medicines, are increasing steadily. This cumulative anger of the public can be directed against the political class to force it to initiate political and economic reforms.

The first step toward improving the prospects of the protest movement to obtain its objectives is the formation of a unified leadership and a coherent coalition of protest groups. As discussed above, the absence of a unified leadership and a coherent coalition of protest groups undermined the credibility of the protest movement and made it prone to sectarian parties' manipulations to obtain their parochial interests. This has undermined the credibility of the protest movement and its ability to secure its momentum. The protestors questioned its ability to replace the existent political class and lead the transition period if it is not able to agree on a basic feature of any social movement which is the formation of a unified leadership and a coherent coalition.

The importance of a unified leadership is that it is able to set the steps needed to confront the political class and develop a clear political and economic program. There was confusion within the protest movement on how to confront the political class and which approaches should be adopted. Some of the groups advocated violence and road blocking while others proposed a peaceful strategy and organizing sit-ins and non-violent protests. This confusion and lack of clarity on the steps and approaches to face the political class dissuaded many Lebanese from participating in the protests although the socio-economic conditions are deteriorating, there is a rapid increase in the inflation rate and people's anger is augmenting.

Regarding the political program, the protest movement should develop a clear political and economic program. The protests are an expression of anger against the political class. However, this is not sufficient to exert pressure on the political class unless the protest movement develops a clear political and economic program that sets clear objectives. The protest movement should clearly clarify its position regarding several essential issues, including: 1) Which electoral law should be formulated and implemented in the next parliamentary elections? 2) Should the current political system be replaced with a non-sectarian system? And when and how? 3) Which economic and financial policies should the government adopt? 4) Should the government comply with the International Monetary Fund recommendations to privatize the public sector? 5) How to tackle the public debt and how to restructure it? How to restructure the banking sector? 6) How to tackle the failure of the electricity sector? And 7) Which plan should be implemented to solve the rubbish crisis?

One of the main challenges facing the protest movement is the next parliamentary elections in the Spring of 2022. The movement should organize itself as soon as possible to be able to provide a competent and robust competitor to the current political class. If the protest movement does not address the abovementioned factors (unified leadership, organizing itself and having a political program), it will most likely face failure and repeat its failed experience in 2018 parliamentary elections. The 2022 parliament is of paramount importance. Firstly, the next parliament will elect the next president in October 2022. Secondly, it will nominate the PM and give vote of confidence to government which will implement reforms and plans to solve the economic and financial crisis currently plaguing the country. Thus, the next elections are essential for the protest movement to be able to dominate the political system and reform the state institutions.

Therefore, the protest movement should keep its struggle buoyant to obtain its objectives, especially that the abovementioned factors cannot solely guarantee its success. This is because its success depends on internal factors as discussed above and on external factors as well. Doug McAdam argues that the success of social movements depends on the division of the political class which can capitalize on them to weaken it and replace it⁹⁶. The current Lebanese political class is protected by two main factors: sectarianism, which is still shaping the political behavior of the Lebanese citizens, and external political support and funding, which manipulate the political parties to achieve foreign players' interests.

⁹⁶ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, 9th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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