



The Lebanese uprising

Dave Stockton, Red Flag 32, November 2019 Sat, 16/11/2019 - 12:56

Dave Stockton, Red Flag 32, November 2019

Lebanon, like Iraq, Sudan and Algeria, is experiencing its own version of the Arab Spring with mass demonstrations, occupations and street blockades. The movement quickly spread from Beirut to Tripoli in the north and Tyre in the south involving people from the country's different religious confessions.

But unlike the 'Spring' in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria at the beginning of the decade, Lebanon's is not an uprising against a brutal dictator but a corrupt and grotesquely inefficient government based on confessional parties and elites that systematically plunder the country's resources.

A series of abject failures by government to meet basic needs provided tinder for the so-called 'WhatsApp tax' to become the spark that lit the fire. Regular electricity blackouts and cuts to the water supply exacerbate the misery of a country in which unemployment stands at 25 per cent, rising to 40 per cent among under-25s.

In the weeks immediately preceding the uprising, widespread forest wildfires revealed that firefighters lacked the basic equipment to deal with them, and even helicopters, donated to the country for this purpose, were out of commission due to lack of maintenance.

It took little then for young people to blame the political system - one based on a precarious constellation of Christian, Sunni and Shia Muslim parties, dividing the spoils of office and fueling obscene nepotism and corruption.

Nizar Hassan, an activist with LiHaqqi ('For My Rights'), a group organising the demonstrations, said people had finally to come to see it was the system as a whole - rather than specific parties or actors - that was the real problem.

But it will not be so easy to push aside the parties and their powerful militias. Under the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended Lebanon's bloody civil war, the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim. Parliamentary seats are also allocated according to a quota. Following parliamentary elections in May 2018, months of haggling ended in a coalition government representing the principal Maronite, Sunni, and Shia parties.

The leader of the Shia Hezbollah organization, Hassan Nasrallah, demagogically supported the movement's economic grievances, whilst opposing Hariri's resignation and accusing 'outside forces' (read Israel and the USA) of trying to hijack the protests to weaken Hezbollah. On 29 October supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal party attacked demonstrators and journalists and torched encampments in Beirut.

Despite Hariri's resignation, no-one else has left the government. The elites of all the confessional parties and organisations will fight tooth and nail to preserve the existing system.

To overcome the intransigence of the political elites, the movement needs to organise itself to prevent the system holding out until the protests are exhausted or split along sectarian lines. The first step is the election of cross-community delegate committees to coordinate the protests, and extend them to the workplaces, to lay the ground for an all-out and indefinite general strike. Appeals should be made to the rank and file of the soldiers and militias to break with their commanders and put themselves at the service of popular militias under democratic control.

The central goal of the movement must be the abolition of the confessional system that makes a mockery of democracy.

Concretely, this means the convening of a sovereign constituent assembly, elected on the basis of one-person-one-vote, without religious weighting. This assembly should debate for itself the future constitutional basis of Lebanon ? equality between religious minorities, the social and economic regime ? capitalist or socialist. True sovereignty means free from foreign interference; that requires freedom of the press guaranteed by journalists? trade unions, and freedom from military intervention guaranteed by a workers? militia.

To convene such an assembly requires a working class struggle not only against the confessional system, but also against capitalist exploitation and a spreading of a Lebanese revolution to all the other countries of the region including Palestine. Its ultimate goal must be of a Socialist United States of the Middle East.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/lebanese-uprising>