Lebanon: The Revolution has begun

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The explosion of 2750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate in the port of Beirut on August 4, which killed 154 people and injured over 5,000, left the city in devastation. An estimated 300,000, over 10 percent of the population of Lebanon's capital, have been rendered homeless and grain silos destroyed or their contents rendered unusable. This, in a country that was already in economic crisis, enduring hyperinflation and facing virtual national bankruptcy.

But the disaster also triggered a social and political explosion that is even more profound for the future of the country, a real political detonation.

The country's predicament is turning into a revolutionary crisis. The country's hated political elite, practically all state and official institutions; the presidency, parliament, the bureaucracy, established parties, the police and courts, have all squandered their last, already minimal, credit with the population. Desperation quickly turned into a new wave of mass protest, which began to take on the characteristics of an uprising.

In recent years, there have been huge mobilisations directed against governments, such as the "You Stink" campaign in 2015, which targeted the lack of waste disposal in Beirut. Most recently, the government was threatened by a "revolution" of the population in autumn 2019. At that time, a threatened new daily tax for calls made via apps including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and FaceTime, brought hundreds of thousands, if not millions, onto the streets and paralysed public life.

Now the anger is directed against the entire "elite" of the country; the government, the state apparatus and the small layer of rich businessmen and their followers, who have been plundering the country more or less collectively for years.

The tragedy in the port turned the grief, anger and hatred of the population into action. At this stage the movement is united by one demand above all; the entire "elite", the establishment, must go. The streets ring with calls for "Revolution, Revolution" and "The people want the overthrow of the government".

The government's imposition of a 14-day state of emergency produced, as with many spontaneous mass movements that erupted with elemental force, the opposite of what was intended. A state of emergency that cannot be enforced reveals the powerlessness of the government, a fundamental, albeit temporary, shift in the balance of power. It is more likely to increase the determination of the revolutionary masses. The announcement of new elections, obviously intended to act as a mere sedative, is likely to have a similar effect.

As the daily mass demonstrations and clashes with the police reveal, the population can no longer be intimidated. On August 8, the demonstrators stormed government buildings, including 4 ministries and the World Trade Centre. Apparently former army officers led the storming, on the other hand, it was also the
army that ended it and expelled the occupiers.

The situation in the country takes on the characteristics of a revolutionary upheaval, the first phase of a revolution. The Lebanese ruling class and its government are apparently no longer masters of the situation.

In addition, there is the extreme economic and social crisis, the real underpinning of a revolutionary wave, which has been sparked mainly by issues of democracy, political oppression, disenfranchisement and corruption, in other words, the plundering of the country by the elite.

In fact, Lebanon has long been on the brink of national bankruptcy. In March, the country was unable to service a maturing bond of 1.2 billion dollars. In addition, the currency policy of the government, which for years tied the lira to the US dollar in the interest of financial speculators in Beirut, is in ruins. The peg to the dollar had to be abandoned. This year, the country has been plagued by monthly devaluations of the lira of around 50 percent.

The port was the country's last remaining source of income and an essential distribution point for goods of all kinds, so the humanitarian catastrophe is further exacerbating the economic situation.

Imperialism?s aid?

In the face of the political crisis, the imperialist powers, first of all the former colonial power, France, are trying to present themselves as saviours in time of need. Demagogically, during his visit to Beirut, President Emanuel Macron posed as a critic of the country's elite, who, he said, now had to act "transparently" and "democratically". Playing on the justified mistrust of the government and the state apparatus, he proposed an undefined mechanism for the direct distribution of medicine, food and other relief supplies to the population. In the worst case, that could, perhaps, be fulfilled by a "humanitarian" mission of the French army or the Foreign Legion. Even countries like Russia, China and Germany, even the USA under Trump, now present themselves as selfless helpers.

In reality, they are pursuing two goals. First, they want to pacify the country. A revolution that could sweep away the political system and also act as an inspiration for the entire Middle East is something that all major and regional powers want to prevent at all costs. By presenting themselves as "friends of the people", they are ultimately trying to appease the mass movement and let it run into the sand as so many of the revolutions of the Arab Spring did.

The people should not forget that these same powers share responsibility for the situation itself. Lebanon's system, which divides society according to religious communities, is inextricably linked to sectarianism and corruption. It arose not least from the interests of France, the former colonial power. The great powers and global finance capital, not only, indeed not even primarily, the local elites, have been plundering the country for decades. Last, but not least, the leverage of the country's oppressive national debt and its integration into international financial flows are proving to be extremely effective instruments of power and obstacles to any independent economic development.

When powers such as France now promise seemingly selfless help, they have in mind both their longer-term business interests and their geostrategic goals in the restructuring of the Middle East. This is where French imperialism, and with it the EU, is engaged in a bitter struggle with the USA, China, Russia and various regional powers.

Economic Situation

Even before the Corona pandemic, the crisis had led to extreme poverty. Around half the population now
lives below the poverty line. Millions of refugees are particularly affected. First of all, there are at least half a million Palestinians who have been denied the right to return by Zionism and imperialism for decades. They are also massively discriminated against by the Lebanese government (denial of citizenship; inhumane camps, exclusion from numerous professions). Secondly, since the beginning of the civil war, some 1.5 million people have fled Syria to Lebanon, about half of them children and young people.

At the same time, the social structure of the country, particularly in Beirut, where about one third of the country's population lives, has changed in recent years. For a long time, religious affiliation correlated with social status. The capitalist class, drawn largely from the Christian community, played a major part in the confessional carve up of the country. The Shi'ites mainly lived in the poorer districts of the city. In recent years this has changed to some extent. The share of Shi'ites and Sunnis in the country's economic elite, e.g. in the 100 richest people in the country, increased. This is certainly a consequence of the integration of Hezbollah into the state leadership through the "peace process" and thus a broadening of the ruling classes. In recent years, Hezbollah has become an integral part of the country's elite, as can be seen from its strategic alliance with President Michel Aoun.

The other side of this change in the composition of the elite and the ruling system is that there has also been some convergence in the living conditions of Muslim, Christian and Druze workers.

From struggle against the elite to revolution!

The demand for the resignation of the entire political elite of the country, all parties, members of the government, the president, officials, judges, in other words the central parts of the state apparatus, is not surprising in view of the pseudo-democratic, religious-sectarian division of offices and influence, widespread nepotism and years of plundering by financial capital. The demand is strongly reminiscent of the early stages of virtually all the Arab revolutions.

At the same time, the development also shows how closely democratic issues, not only in Lebanon, are linked to social and class issues.

The explosion actually illustrates this; the 2750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate had already been stored in the port for 6 years. As research by Al Jazeera shows, they had not simply been "forgotten". At least six times, customs officials wrote to the Lebanese justice department and demanded intervention, their appeals were ignored. This makes it clear that not only individual courts, but the entire state apparatus is completely indifferent to the vital interests of the population. The state is seen as a means of personal enrichment and as booty, the distribution of which the various bourgeois parties and leaders of religious-political groups fight over.

The more the country slipped into economic and social crisis, the more precarious, degrading and useless this system became for the masses. From the point of view of the elites, their parties and their clientele, any use of state funds for the common good, such as health care, infrastructure, waste disposal, communications or unemployment benefits would be a deduction from the benefits that should accrue to them.

This has now led, as it did at a lower level in 2019, to the explosion, the uprising of the working class, the urban poor and even the petty bourgeoisie and middle classes. The scale of the crisis, the inability and sheer unwillingness of the state to provide any real help has now forced the population to build self-organised structures to help the injured, the homeless or the starving and to maintain elementary forms of daily life. Even if these organs were born out of necessity, they represent embryonic organs of a counter-power, alternative centres of power to the existing state apparatus.
The fact that former officers may have led the occupation of government buildings indicates that the government's control over the repressive apparatus is also crumbling. All these are unmistakable signs of the beginning of a revolutionary development.

But, like the Arab revolutions, Lebanon is facing an extreme problem; the revolution lacks a political leadership, a strategy, a programme for reorganising society to solve its most pressing problems. Although the movement raises the question of power by demanding the resignation or dismissal of the entire “elite”, an end to its corruption, enrichment and de facto impunity, it has no idea with what to replace it. Logically, this also leaves the goals of a “revolution” unclear.

Practically all the Arab democratic revolutions of the last decade were broken by this problem. The masses of workers, peasants, urban poor or small self-employed people lost the initiative. Although they had carried the bulk of the uprisings, they had to watch helplessly as various forces of counterrevolution took over or crushed their movements. This is also a threat in Lebanon.

Programme

The task of socialist, communist forces, therefore, is to advance the movement, to organise its best fighters. That, however, requires clarity about the tasks and programme of the revolution. We cannot present such a programme in detail here, but we can suggest some key demands.

- Disclosure of all documents concerning the explosion in the port; formation of committees of inquiry; sentencing of those responsible for ignoring the warnings by public tribunals elected by the people; compensation for the relatives of all those killed, wounded and those who lost their homes!

- Ensure the survival of the population by confiscating the assets of the wealthiest and the biggest enterprises. Distribution of relief supplies, food and medicine under the control of committees and councils in districts, factories, in the countryside; this task must not be left to the government and its apparatus or to imperialist states. Aid workers of humanitarian organisations should act under the control of such committees and councils.

- Draw up an emergency plan to supply the population, ensuring free allocation of essential goods to the needy. This requires, among other things, the cancellation of foreign debts, the expropriation without compensation of all banks, financial institutions, large companies of Lebanese and foreign capitalists as well as the private assets of the super-rich under workers' control; the consolidation of the financial institutions into a central bank to stabilise the lira; the establishment of minimum wages and pensions that cover the cost of living.

- Withdrawal of the state of emergency and special powers of the army leadership, release of all political prisoners and detainees! Formation of self-defence committees of the movement and workers' militias in the districts and factories! The soldiers must be called upon to take the side of the movement, form soldiers' councils, arm workers' and self-defence militias and support them with training!

- Abolish all religious, sectarian laws and political restrictions! Full inclusion of women and Syrian and Palestinian refugees in the movement and the struggle for the Lebanese revolution, including full electoral and citizenship rights for the refugees!

- Formation of councils and action committees in all workplaces, residential areas, in the city and in the countryside to lead the movement, to decide on its actions and direction. These bodies should be elected by the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods and workers in the factories, and must be accountable to, and recallable by, their electors. They must be grouped together at city, regional and national level into a
council congress that provisionally assumes the power of government.

- Down with government and president! No to new elections under the control of the state apparatus! No to any imperialist military or police "aid" under French or any other leadership!

- Convene a Constituent Assembly under the control of the organs of the mass movement, district and workplace committees that should oversee the electoral process, the admission of candidates and access to the media.

- Such an Assembly must debate the major democratic, political and social issues of the reorganisation of the country. Precisely because the desire for democracy is such an important issue, the assembly, its convocation and control can and must become a means of convincing the masses that a successful, consistent revolution must place power in the hands of a government based directly on the democratic councils of workers and peasants, urban poverty and the lower strata of the petty bourgeoisie.

- Such a government, in order to carry out the tasks of the revolution, must sweep away the corrupt bourgeois state apparatus throughout the country, replacing it with councils, corporate and municipal organs of self-government, soldiers' councils and workers' militias! It must expropriate the ruling class and the imperialist corporations and investors and reorganise the economy on the basis of democratic planning.

In order to spread such a programme of transitional demands and win the working class and oppressed masses, a political force, a revolutionary, communist workers' party is needed. To create such a fighting organisation is the order of the day for all proletarian revolutionaries!

The revolution in Lebanon and all the revolutionaries in the country need the solidarity of the international working class and the left at all levels; from organising aid to the population, political solidarity campaigns for the cancellation of the debt, in the struggle for aid to be delivered without political and economic conditions. Above all, it also needs the closest possible connection with all the forces that are actively involved in building a revolutionary movement in the countries of the Middle East, the creation of a solidarity movement and a new, Fifth, International that fights for socialist revolution in Lebanon, in the Middle East and worldwide!

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