Executive Summary

Since 17 October, around a third of the Lebanese population has poured onto the streets across the country, blaming the country’s political elite for corruption, failing public services and driving the economy to the brink. The protests were sparked by anger at the government’s announcement of further tax plans, while volunteer firefighters battled unprecedented wildfires ravaging the country.

Besides some clashes involving the security forces and various political factions, the protests have remained peaceful. Contrary to the country’s 2005 and 2015 uprisings that were managed by political parties (2005) or spearheaded by civil society groups (2015), the current protests are grassroots and decentralised in character.

Protesters’ short-term demand included the resignation of the government, including prime minister Saad Hariri, and the appointment of a government of independent experts. They have achieved the former; the government resigned and only continues in a care-taker function.

Protesters have also achieved something else: They have developed spaces for and a practice of direct political dialogue on many squares, streets or previously public but now privatised properties. Lebanese are not only protesting; they are discussing with each other in large numbers. Furthermore, while the protests and debates are not directed by seasoned activists or politicians, people exercise effective leadership at smaller, local levels in organising discussions, marches and roadblocks. Women and young people, who are often at the political and economic margins of society, have played a conspicuous role in the organisation.

As far as long-term demands are concerned, protesters ask for better and accessible public services, better living conditions (jobs, housing, social security), a functioning state but also full citizenship rights that are enshrined and protected in a different political system.

Despite the nation-wide character of the protests, and slogans like “All of them means all of them” and “The people want to tear down the system”, many Lebanese remain attached to the particularism of their sectarian belonging; their show of unity could be more an expression of a “unity in diversity” rather than a wish for dissolution of sectarian identities.
It is difficult to predict if the protesters will be able to change the country, which faces a severe financial and economic crisis to which a political crisis has now been added. Lebanese politics plays out in the context of intensive competition of outside players to shape the small nation’s fate. Already the formation of a government is impeded by regional struggles involving the Iran-Hezbollah axis and its opponents. A new government will have the thankless task of containing the unfolding financial crisis.

What could a new government do to address the protests and the political crisis? One possibility is that it may follow the Algerian scenario of limited concessions while playing for time, hoping that demonstrations lose their momentum. Already one can see attempts to divide protesters on a sectarian basis.

It may also call for a snap election as indeed demanded by protesters. Such election would channel political energies away from street protests. However, under the current electoral system it would be difficult for any new players to gain seats in parliament. Consequently, some analysts consider a reform of the electoral law a precondition to new elections.

A new government may also try to address protesters’ demand by offering a roadmap of how and when to reform the state, including inclusive consultative processes to bring the demanded changes to the election law, the constitutional set-up, to decentralise the country and to strengthen judicial independence. There may be some “low-hanging fruits” that could establish a government’s reform commitment in the short term, including recovering misused revenues, effective tax collection, strengthening the independence of the judiciary and empowerment of local councils which could achieve improvements in service delivery and direct citizen involvement in political decisions.
Why the October 2019 Uprisings Are Different

In contrast to the massive mobilisations witnessed in 2005 and 2015, the events that have been unfolding since October 2019 have distinctive features never seen before in Lebanon. Indeed, the protests have garnered a level of popular support that is unprecedented since the country’s independence in 1943. For the first time, demonstrations are no longer the expression of one political camp pitted against another — as epitomised by the revived antagonism between the “8 March” and “14 March” coalitions, which emerged in 2005 — rather the upsurge of a grassroots movement defying the legitimacy of established political parties.

Protests in Lebanon are typically triggered by political grievances; this time, the popular outburst has deep socio-economic roots. While 2005 was about regaining the sovereignty seized by the Syrian regime, and 2015 was directed against the ruling class’s ineffective governance, the government’s failure to deliver on its ambitious promises was a clear sign that it has exhausted its attempts to introduce structural political and socio-economic reforms. Amid high unemployment and a debt-to-GDP ratio of 150%, long-simmering public resentment about the state of the economy reached a boiling point in October 2019 with the announcement of a tax on WhatsApp calls by the government.

The realisation of the country’s shared fate, with dire socio-economic conditions affecting all social groups across Lebanon, is perhaps the main factor behind the decentralised character of the uprisings. Protests, sit-ins and marches have been organised in most Lebanese cities. For once, Beirut did not monopolise the media’s attention, but Tripoli (dubbed the “star of the revolution”) and towns that had never witnessed a mobilisation of such scale. A 170-kilometre-long human chain from north to south, created by 170,000 people on 27 October, epitomised the interlink between the different protests, signalling a sense of solidarity and national unity beyond regions and religions.

Within this decentralised setting, protesters have learnt to develop a civic space that fills the void between society and the state. Public fora have reclaimed privatised public property to serve as platforms for cultural expression and civic dialogue on core citizen concerns. Camping-style meetings have attracted thousands of people, not only in Beirut, to discuss strategies and tactics to advance the uprising’s agenda. There are also lectures (“teach-ins”) by academics and experts about systemic economic and political issues. The Lebanese are learning and practising civic education on the streets: collecting and sorting their waste, recycling, debating citizen-centred policies and politics — all things that politicians have failed to do.

While the 2005 demonstrations were highly centralised, meticulously framed and staged by the ruling parties, and the 2015 protests were spearheaded by civil society’s #YouStink campaign, both political and civil society actors were unprepared for the pace at which the 2019 protests evolved. Although they have been notable for the absence of individual leaders, the protests have not lacked leadership per se; rather they reflect the emergence of a grassroots movement outside the control of political parties and emerging civil society movements.

Social media and WhatsApp are the main vehicles for the protesters to communicate and coordinate actions on the ground. Weeks into the protests, these tools have shown their effectiveness in prompting quick, coordinated actions and in avoiding an escalation of violence, despite provocations, repression and recuperation attempts by some political factions.

2 Like Halba, Jal el Dib, Nabatiyeh, Tyre, Sidon, Zouk Mosbeh, Batroun, Zahlé and Rachaya.
Initiating action at the front of marches, sit-ins and roadblocks, young people and women have been the driving force behind the movement. In a political system where these groups have been chronically underrepresented, they are making themselves heard in the streets. This surge of visibility can be explained by the absence of top-down organisation. Youths are leading the protests, not seasoned, charismatic activists. In an economy that creates no more than 5,000 jobs a year for more than 30,000 university graduates, high youth unemployment and alienation from self-perpetuating “old school” politics has left Lebanese youths with little choice but to emigrate or demonstrate.

In the same vein, the prominence of Lebanese women in the protests signals their determination to reclaim their role in public life. Only 25% of Lebanese women participate in the labour force, according to a 2017 World Bank survey, and they hold less than 5% of political posts in municipal councils, the parliament and the government. Consequently, Lebanon ranks 140th on the 2018 Global Gender Gap Index. Patriarchal politics has resulted not only in women’s exclusion from public office but also their economic marginalisation and the denial of basic civil rights. To this day, Lebanese women cannot pass on their nationality to their children and their civil status is dependent on their male next of kin.

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What Do the Protesters Want?

Several political demands have converged during the demonstrations. Protesters have demanded the immediate resignation of the government (achieved on 29 October); the appointment of a small government with extraordinary powers, comprising qualified experts with no political affiliation (a.k.a. “technocrats”); the implementation of urgent reforms; and a snap election, leading to the election of a new president.

The bigger picture is that Lebanese citizens demand a transition towards accountability, job opportunities, social justice and access to essential public services that the ruling parties have failed to deliver. Lebanon ranks 138th out of 180 countries in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, and 77% of Lebanese people do not trust their politicians. This is hardly surprising when half of them are not covered by social security, and environmental degradation is causing chronic illness at alarming rates. Lebanon’s infrastructure ranks 113th out of 137 countries and it has the world’s fourth worst quality of electricity supply. Since 1990, this sector has been characterised by severe supply shortages, inefficiency and losses, and it amounts to 40% of Lebanon’s public debt alone.

Vested political interests in all sectors have resulted in an absence of reforms, but these can no longer be delayed. The richest 1% of Lebanese citizens receives 25% of national income while the top 0.1%, around 3,700 people, earns as much as the bottom 50%. Most of the wealth owners are connected to politicians by kinship or business ties, and this organic interdependence between the political and economic spheres must now give way to a new elite that resets the rules of politics on the basis of democratic principles, competence, cost-efficiency and publicly accountable government.

At the same time, protesters understand that “administrative” reforms are less a matter of technical expertise in public management than a new way of doing politics. The birth of a new political spirit in public institutions is linked to the reconfiguration of political power at large. Beyond governance issues, the protests signal a call for human dignity and full citizenship rights enshrined and protected in a different political system.

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Where is Lebanon heading in the coming months?

Lebanon has now entered an unprecedented political, socio-economic and financial crisis, with no sign of its current leaders agreeing on a new government. Whatever happens next, the public understands that 2020 will be marked by painful transformations that will spare no one: neither politicians nor financial institutions nor citizens.

Amid speculation about who the next prime minister may be, the makeup of the future government remains unclear. Government formation in Lebanon is dictated by a complex representation formula that should include all sects and parties in a way deemed “equitable” by competing sectarian factions. This typically results in very large, unstable governments that are sworn in after gridlock lasting several months. Therefore, a small government of independent “technocrats” would be a hard pill for the ruling parties to swallow.

Instead, politicians favour a so-called “techno-political” combination consisting of major party figures and politically experienced experts. Beyond the willingness of each side to compromise on the form, the identity of each cabinet member will be subject to mutual vetoing among political factions and a tug-of-war between them and the protesters. Amid mounting pressure on the streets and a looming economic meltdown, they do not have the luxury of time.

Worse, the formation of the government does not only depend on domestic factors, i.e. the challenge of reconciling antagonistic political blocs to nominate a prime minister and reach a consensus on the allocation of ministerial portfolios; it is also a regional issue. The Hezbollah-Iran axis is adamant about securing a share in the new government as a lifeline against tightening US sanctions and a loss of legitimacy. Iran is now more vulnerable in Iraq, Yemen, as well as at home, where protests are beginning to defy the regime’s authoritarianism. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Trump administration is exerting efforts to keep Hezbollah out of government, following its determination to choke Iran and its proxies politically and financially. Thus, the formation of a new government is would be no small feat.

After the new government is sworn in, one of the scenarios would be the calling of a snap election under the current electoral law. This could stall the momentum created by the protesters, keeping burgeoning opposition groups busy with coalition building and electioneering rather than ramping up pressure on the ground. The mass mobilisations have immediately influenced the political agenda, so sustaining a strong street presence could achieve better results for now. The scale of the recent protests sends a strong message that the ruling parties have lost considerable popularity, but this does not necessarily mean their crushing defeat in the upcoming elections. Without prior reform of the electoral law, a quick election may not generate much change.

The current electoral law, which is a combination of majoritarian and proportional representation, has high effective electoral thresholds (10–20%) that put new political contenders at a disadvantage, thus lowering the chances of achieving enough representation to make a substantial change. Unless protesters unite under the banner of one opposition movement and lead a powerful and well-coordinated national campaign that garners wide support in every region, the new parliament would not look very different to the current one.

The second scenario would be an election based on a new law. Reaching consensus on this matter will not be a quick process and there are no guarantees that the new law will be more to the advantage of emerging political groups than the existing one. The third scenario would be a regular election in 2022 in line with the constitutional deadline, under the current electoral law or a new one. In either scenario, for new contenders to make a significant breakthrough, there should be enough lead time for a credible opposition to organise and prepare itself for a country-wide campaign.

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For now, the success of the protesters will be measured by their ability to pressure the established parties to form a new government that is as close as possible to their demands, and to continue scrutinising its performance (as well as the parliament’s) towards their fulfilment. While the governing class is gambling on the protests running out of steam, opposition groups seem to have understood this and are currently building a coalition in preparation for the electoral confrontation.\(^{14}\)

As for the future government, it will have the thankless task of steering the country through a political and economic crisis. It is widely accepted that the most pressing priorities are the implementation of a comprehensive package of integrity measures and a rescue plan that mitigates the effects of the financial collapse.

The integrity package should start with a law on judicial independence that ends the institutionalised interference of the political executive in the appointment of judicial bodies — including the Constitutional Council. Similarly, the role and capacities of oversight agencies should be bolstered, along with the implementation of stringent legal and regulatory mechanisms for integrity (illicit enrichment, transparency, whistle-blower protection, asset recovery, etc.).

While politics draws most of the attention, the unfolding economic crisis represents the most imminent threat, with far-reaching consequences for the financial sector and, most importantly, for citizens. In October, the World Bank warned that poverty could rise from 27% to 50% if drastic measures are not taken.

The new government will need to restructure its debt and lay the groundwork for new financial and fiscal policies. Experts claim they will need to adopt and execute a three-year budget (2020–2022) that gradually reduces the state’s outsized deficit close to balancing it, not through tax increases — which are counterproductive during a recession — but by recovering its unrealised revenues and tackling wasteful public expenditure.\(^{15}\) The future cabinet should curb tax evasion, audit the sectors most crippled by corruption (e.g. telecommunications, customs, the port of Beirut), and suppress fictitious employment and overstaffing in some administrations as a result of patronage.

On many fronts, the future incumbents will have to decide which sacrifices constitute lesser evils. The Lebanese pound has already started to depreciate and confidence in the banking sector is plummeting, driving capital out of the country. Banks have resorted to capital controls which, in turn, have fuelled a bank run by depositors. In other words, the government needs to act.

Against this backdrop, which portends a re-intensification of the protests, the fate of Syrian refugees has captured little media attention. As Lebanon enters a deep economic crisis, unskilled labour will become scarcer and cheaper, which will increase Syrians’ dependence on foreign donor assistance and possibly drive them gradually out of the country. This could also reignite the controversial discourse around their “safe return”.

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\(^{14}\) See Al-Akhbar’s report on the 18 November meeting of the opposition groups: https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/279649 (29 November 2019).

A Path Towards A New Lebanon?

Despite the arduous road ahead, the uprisings could nevertheless provide an opening for a transition towards accountable and citizen-centred governance. That politicians acknowledge the necessity of change within the Lebanese political system is itself a notable achievement for the protesters.

For government integrity and accountability to materialise, judicial reform should be complemented by an adequate system of checks and balances. Decoupling the parliamentary function from the ministerial one would improve the Lebanese parliament’s oversight of the executive branch. Oversight agencies should also be given more independence, avoiding administrative supervision by the Prime Minister’s Office.

This would help make the policy-making function of future governments more effective, provided that they are more cohesive. Since 1992, Lebanese cabinets have become miniature parliamentary-like structures preoccupied with the representation of minority interests and hinging on political consensus on sectarian shares in the state bureaucracy. As a result, factions have held considerable veto power, leading to government stalemate or dissolution.

Systemic change is a long-term endeavour that will also need to involve the regeneration of the political elite. With an active civil society landscape, Lebanon is already witnessing small, incremental changes that have considerable repercussions. In the summer of 2015, the #YouStink campaign against the mismanagement of waste channelled the anger of many Lebanese citizens from all regions and religions against the established parties, yet it failed to deliver a unified vision for a way forward. Even in local elections, the system stymied possibilities for change. For example, in the May 2016 municipal elections, a campaign proposing a plan to address the waste crisis (called Beirut Madinati) won 30.5% of the votes in Beirut but gained no seat on the council due to the electoral system. In May 2019, the civil society coalition Kulluna Watani could only get one member into the parliament. Slowly but surely, new political contenders are learning from these experiences to join forces and optimise their chances of success.

The issue of just political representation thus remains critical. There has been a long-standing popular demand for a genuine proportional representation system with larger electoral districts) that would allow newcomers a chance to gain representation. Also, the regeneration of Lebanon’s political elite will be incomplete without the emergence of female leadership. Previous draft election laws foresaw a gender quota.

Looking ahead at national elections, the number, size and borders of the electoral districts are the most contentious points. There is also the thorny issue of abolishing sectarian quotas. Despite the slogans “All of them means all of them” and “The people want to tear down the system”, there is no strong sign that Lebanese society, aside from the urban, civil society elite, is ready to overcome the role of sects in politics. Many Lebanese people remain attached to the particularism of their sectarian belonging; their show of unity could be more an expression of a “unity in diversity” rather than a wish for integration into one national identity.

The seeds of long-term change at the national level should be planted at the local level. The decentralised character of the demonstrations crystallises the acuteness of local aspirations for socio-economic welfare and public services, and accountable citizen engagement; hence, policy solutions for these grievances should start locally. This, rather than bold ideologies, can facilitate broader political buy-in, considering that the accession of a new elite to power is easier in local politics than in national politics. The small size of municipal districts would allow this transition whatever the electoral system. However, local, citizen-centred politics requires the modernisation of the municipal framework and wider decentralisation reform along the lines of subsidiarity and financial viability (through municipal mergers, a sound equalisation system and a fiscal framework consistent with the mandate of local governments).16

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Finally, the bottom-up nature of the mobilisations provides a strong case for citizen engagement at the local level. Elected municipal leaders who rely on the power of volunteering, and who foster a sense of initiative and civil responsibility, can serve as role models for the politics that young protesters aspire to have. By organising “open mic tribunes” that give citizens a voice, local actors have made their wishes clear: from now on, Lebanese politics should be inclusive of citizens and regulated by strong accountability and integrity frameworks that trickle down to the local level.
