

Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising

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Abstract

Although the October Uprising crossed sectarian borders and social classes, it was not only an outcry against the political class. Sectarianism is a dominant factor in shaping the political orientations and behaviour of the Lebanese people. This article seeks to answer the following question: Why did certain cities witness large protests while elsewhere, the number of protesters was comparatively small? I will explore and discuss the factors behind this phenomenon from a sectarian perspective which can also deepen our understanding of the factors that led to the failure of the Uprising so far to achieve its goals.

Just over a month ago, Lebanon marked the first annual commemoration of its Uprising, which erupted on October 17, 2019. In an event unprecedented since the end of the Civil War in 1989, Lebanese gathered in public squares to denounce the governing political class and its pervasive corruption, which has hindered the country's economic and social development. The protests were a direct response to the government's intention to impose taxes on WhatsApp usage, which tipped anger over deteriorating economic and social conditions over the edge. A rapid increase in inflation and unemployment rates, a shortage of dollars, which is pegged to Lebanese Lira,² and the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic all contributed to the outrage.

On the surface, the Uprising crossed the sectarian and social lines. But a closer look reveals that sectarianism is still a dominant factor in shaping the political orientations and behaviour of the Lebanese people. Among the first things an observer would have noticed about the Uprising is that the size of the protests differed from city to city. Some saw large protests, while in others, the number of demonstrators was relatively small. Exploring the Uprising from a sectarian perspective will help explain why it has thus far failed to achieve its goals.

Sectarian Groups and the October Uprising

There are four dominant sectarian communities in Lebanon: Christians, Shi'a, Sunnis and Druze. The first three communities occupy the roles of President, Speaker of Parliament, and Prime Minister, respectively. Each group used the Uprising to achieve its own interests.

The Christian community is rife with political divisions and opposing orientations. The most popular party was the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), which won the majority of Christian parliamentary seats in 2018 elections. Its main aim since the return of its leader, Michel Aoun, from exile in 2005 has been to rekindle the Christians' role in the political system.³ The FPM stressed the importance of equal distribution of state positions and revenues between sects. However, the FPM failed to achieve its objectives. Although it was able to nominate Christians to the main state positions, it was not able to improve the community's socio-economic conditions. The FPM's compromise with the leader of the

¹ The author is an eyewitness of the Uprising because he participated in the protests and attended several panel discussions organised by the protesters in Down Town Beirut.

² Lebanon imports about 80% of its goods thus any fluctuation in the exchange rate will affect the prices of the basic goods.

³ Aoun was forced into exile in 1990 because of his military opposition to the Syrian military presence. From 1990 to 2005, the Muslim parties dominated the political system and marginalised the main Christian parties and elites.

Future Movement, Saad Hariri, in order to nominate Mr Aoun to the position of President in 2016 made matters worse.⁴ Mr Hariri and his political party have been widely accused, particularly by the FPM, of being corrupt and for institutionalising financial policies that have led to the current financial crisis, currency collapse and hyperinflation.

From the FPM's point of view, therefore, the protests were an insidious attempt by domestic and external parties to topple Mr Aoun and blame him for the country's economic collapse. However, rival Christian parties, the Lebanese Forces Party (LFP) and the Kataeb Party, viewed the protests as an opportunity to undermine the political influence of the FPM. The LFP leader, Samir Geagea, considered the protests as a movement against political class's corruption.⁵ He encouraged his followers to participate in the protests by raising the Lebanese flag, but discouraged using party chants.⁶ The Kataeb leader, Sami Gemayel, held a similar view, and urged party supporters to participate.⁷ It was widely known that protesters in the Christian-dominated Jal el Dib area in northern Beirut included LFP and Kataeb supporters.⁸ There, protesters chanted slogans against Mr Aoun and his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, and accused the FPM of failing to fulfil its promise to reform the electricity sector despite holding the Ministry of Energy portfolio since 2008.

The Shi'a community, meanwhile, saw few protests in districts where they dominated (South and Baalbeck-Hermal). This was a result of their fears about the status of the Resistance, Hezbollah's armed wing – the concern was that the group would be marginalised if widespread protests resulted, impacting the entire Shi'a community. When the protests erupted, Hezbollah expressed its cautious support for them, while warning against foreign manipulation and manoeuvring. However, several clashes erupted between Hezbollah supporters and protesters in downtown Beirut. These clashes, which occurred after protesters insulted Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and accused him of being corrupt, raised fears that the party would be dragged into sectarian agitations. This led to an abrupt change in the party's position on the protests, leading to warnings that supporters were being dragged into the clashes, and that they should thus keep their distance – an instruction that was heeded by the majority.

Two factors can explain this shift. First, the history of the Lebanese Shi'a is one of repression and marginalisation. Since the country's inception in 1920, the Shi'a influence on the political system has been limited. The main governing position allocated to the community has been that of Speaker of Parliament – a position whose term is renewed annually and thus puts the Speaker under constant pressure. The community was also afflicted by poverty, a low level of education and the absence of political organisation, which undermined their ability to advance their interests. In the south, the Shi'a are also subjected to Israeli assaults on their villages.⁹ All this has given rise to a sense of insecurity within the community. Second, since Lebanon's political system pits sectarian groups against each other, this creates insecurity among them, and prompts them to acquire means of power (foreign alliances and military capability, for example) to improve their negotiating positions and secure their interests.¹⁰

The community which saw the greatest participation in the protests was the Sunnis. Large numbers joined the Uprising, particularly in Tripoli, the country's second-largest city in the country.¹¹ Al-

⁴ The compromise included the FPM nomination of Hariri to the PM position.

⁵ NNA, "Geagea Calls on Protesters to Keep Their Faith While Refraining from Disrupting Public Order, Says "Forming A Completely Different Government Is The Least We Can Do", National News Agency, October 19 2019, available on: <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/108749/nna-leb.gov.lb/en>.

⁶ ICG, Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit, International Crisis Group (Brussels, 2020), 3-4, available on: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/214-pulling-lebanon-out-of-the-pit.pdf>.

⁷ Kareem Chehayeb, "Army and Protesters Face Off Over Roadblocks As Lebanon Continues to Boil," Middle East Eye, October 23 2019, available on: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/army-and-protesters-face-over-roadblocks-lebanon-continues-boil>. ICG, Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit, 3-4.

⁸ Chehayeb, "Army and Protesters Face Off Over Roadblocks As Lebanon Continues to Boil."

⁹ Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion (London and Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002), 7-13.

¹⁰ Abbas Assi, Democracy in Lebanon: Political Parties and the Struggle for Power since Syrian Withdrawal (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

¹¹ Saadnayel, a Sunni dominated village in Beqaa Valley, witnessed significant protests and road blockades.

Nour Square in Tripoli became the focal point for the protesters, and tens of thousands converged there, demanding the ouster of the Lebanese president and Speaker of Parliament.

The Sunnis' mass participation in the protests can be explained by their unhappiness over their status in the political system as well as the high rate of poverty in the community – an issue made worse by the influx of Syrian refugees into their areas in the wake of the civil war.¹² ¹³ Tripoli was also deemed a “terrorist” city because it harboured Syrian opposition fighters,¹⁴ while many Lebanese Sunnis also joined the fight against Damascus or provided financial and military support to the opposition.¹⁵

On top of this, Sunnis were also left disappointed by the compromise between Saad Hariri and Michel Aoun, which led to the nomination of the latter as President in 2016.¹⁶ This compromise rekindled the old Sunni-Maronite rivalry over state executive powers and revenues.¹⁷ As previously mentioned, Christians' influence over state institutions increased dramatically after the 2016 presidential election. The FPM's influence was increased further by the victory of the March 8 coalition in the 2018 parliamentary elections.¹⁸ This inculcated a sense of fear among the Sunnis that an attempt to marginalise them in the political system and exclude them from government services was underfoot.

For the Druze, their participation in the protests was modest. Walid Jumblatt, the most popular Druze leader, overtly expressed support for the protests in a bid to contain the community's anger over deteriorating economic conditions.¹⁹ He also sought to profit from the movement by exerting pressure on the Lebanese president and the governing coalition. The criticism levelled against the leaders of the Druze community in the protests, in particular against Jumblatt, had convinced many of the community members to withdraw from the protests. He reportedly retaliated by sending his thugs to disperse the protests in several Druze villages.²⁰

Port Explosion and the Regression of October Uprising

The Beirut port explosion on August 4 was expected to ignite a new wave of protests – Lebanese were judged to have reached the end of their tether after repeated attempts to force genuine democratic and economic reforms failed. The explosion, caused when 2,750 kg of ammonium nitrate that were stored in one of the port depots for about six years without basic safety measures ignited, led to the death of about 200, wounded thousands, and caused about US\$4.6 billion worth of damage. Corruption and the recklessness of the political class were blamed for the disaster.²¹ Following the blast, one major protest was

¹² Aya Iskandarani, "How Tripoli Became Lebanon's Protest Capital," *The National*, May 11 2020, available on: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/how-tripoli-became-lebanon-s-protest-capital-1.1017394>.

¹³ UNCHR, Tripoli: City Profile, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016), available on: <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/59850>.

¹⁴ Iskandarani, "How Tripoli Became Lebanon's Protest Capital."

¹⁵ France 24, "Tripoli: From 'Lebanese Kandahar' to Home of Protest Rave," France 24, October 23 2019, available on: <https://www.france24.com/en/20191023-tripoli-from-lebanese-kandahar-to-home-of-protest-rave>.

¹⁶ Hussein Dakroub, "Aoun: My Political Pact with Hariri Remains Intact," *The Daily Star*, August 6 2018, available on: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Aug-07/459351-aoun-my-political-pact-with-hariri-remains-intact.ashx>.

¹⁷ The rivalry between the two communities was intense before the Civil War. Both communities competed over state executive powers (the president and PM).

¹⁸ March 8 and 14 coalitions were formed after the assassination of Hariri in 2005. The former is an alliance of parties which support the Resistance and included the FPM. The later was an alliance of parties that stood against Hizballah's armed wing and headed mainly by Saad Hariri.

¹⁹ The Druze community is a community known for their close social ties and robust support for their leader, Jumblatt. Marwan G. Rowayheb, "Walid Jumblatt and Political Alliances: The Politics of Adaptation," *Middle East Critique* 20, no. 1 (2011). Jumblatt distributed 300,000 LBP and food to poor Druze families after the eruption of the Uprising to dissuade them from turning against him. Caroline Hayek, Jeanine Jalkh, and Anthony Samrani, "The Druze: Two Feet in The Revolution," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, January 21 2020, available on: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1203242/the-druze-two-feet-in-the-revolution>.

²⁰ Rizk, "Jumblatt: Muntafidon 'ala "Şşuġta" ... Wa Al-Intifaġa."

²¹ MEMO, "Lebanon: 3 Ministers, 8 MPs Resign After Beirut Blast," *Middle East Monitor*, August 10 2020, available on: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200810-lebanon-3-ministers-8-mps-resign-after-beirut-blast/>.

organised on August 8. Participants were mostly those who were directly affected by the explosion – grieving relatives and friends of those killed or hurt, or those whose property had been destroyed. Several MPs - from the Kataeb Party, ones who defected from FPM, and several independents - also resigned in protest.²² However, their resignations did little to ignite public anger and push people to protest, because the parliamentarians lacked credibility. Marwan Hamade, for example, is a close comrade of Walid Jumblatt and held several ministerial positions since 1990s. Paula Yacoubian is known for her close relations with the Future Movement as she used to work for its television network, the Future.

Despite the initial groundswell of anger, however, the protests soon petered out. This was again due to the country's sectarian bent, as the different parties exploited parochial interests to tamp down the protests. This is an effective strategy because the country's moribund economy makes securing resources a priority for each community, and the various parties are needed for this end.²³ Another factor which doused the initial sparks of protest was the Covid-19 pandemic, which discouraged Lebanese from turning out in large numbers. The pandemic's effects were made worse by the explosion, as the large numbers of injured caused chaos in hospitals, and resulted in a big spike in Covid-19 infections.

The failure of leaders of the 2011, 2015, and 2019 protests to organise themselves also limited the effectiveness of the movement.²⁴ Rania Masri, an environmental scientist and member of the Citizens in a State party, elaborated: "Those who participated in the October 17 protests, or Intifada, did not represent one political viewpoint, and did not have a united understanding of the political situation. The protests declared a strong rejection, but did not present an alternative".²⁵ Al-Arabi Al-Andari, an activist in the civil movement and member in the Democratic Youth Union, argued that "the differences between these groups in terms of ideology, discourse and goals led to the emergence of contradictions, especially with regard to the desired goal of the civil movement. Some 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".²⁶ In a similar vein, Lebanese writer and academic Tamirace Fakhoury said that "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".²⁷ The absence of a unified leadership and thus an organisational effort blunted the thrust of the protest movement. Ogarit Younan, sociologist and founder of the Academic University of Nonviolence and Human Rights, argued that:

"Spending too much time on forms of expression and protest can exhaust any social movement, leading to monotony and repetition with no specific and targeted 'accomplishment of strength'. In this case, for example, it was repeating the same style of marches, sit-ins, protests, taking to the squares, discussion sessions, festive events and evenings, use of social media, Saturday and Sunday activities, as well as repeating the same methods and forms of confrontation (peaceful or violent).

Another important factor that contributed to the failure of the Uprising was the absence of transitional justice. After the end of the civil war, the Lebanese did not move to prosecute those who committed crimes and mass killings, return those displaced by the conflict, reconstruct devastated villages and buildings, or investigate what happened to those who disappeared or were kidnapped.²⁸ The failure to do this impacted reconciliation, and was an obstacle to unity against the political class.

²² MEMO, "Lebanon: 3 Ministers, 8 MPs Resign After Beirut Blast."

²³ LCPS, "Why Did the October 17 Revolution Witness a Regression in Numbers?," Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (October 31 2020), Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. available on: <http://lcps-lebanon.org/agendaArticle.php?id=199>.

²⁴ Abbas Assi, "Lebanon's Protest Movement Needs New Strategy to Keep People's Support," The Globe Post 2020, available on: <https://theglobepost.com/2020/01/28/lebanon-protest-movement/>. In 2011 and 2015, the Lebanese organised several large protests denouncing the political class. However, these protests did not yield to fundamental changes at the political and economic levels. The 2011 protests erupted following the Arab Uprising and 2015 protests erupted after the failure of the government to tackle the rubbish crisis which clogged the streets of Beirut.

²⁵ LCPS, "Why Did the October 17 Revolution Witness a Regression in Numbers?."

²⁶ Yara Nahle, "Arabi Al-Andari: Lam Nakun Badilan Jaddin [We Were not An Earnest Alternative]," Al-Modon Online, July 23 2016, available on: <https://www.almodon.com/society/2016/7/23/عربي-العنداري-لم-نكن-بديلا-جديلا>.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Fateb Ghosn and Amal Khoury, "Lebanon after the Civil War: Peace or the Illusion of Peace?," Middle East Journal 65, no. 3 (2011).

Finally, violence perpetrated by both the state security forces and the protesters spread fear. Leading intellectual and human rights advocate, Ogarit Younan, explained that this “exhausted, dispersed, terrified, and destroyed...there is no comparison between the violence of the oppressor and that of the oppressed, but even if violence during the revolution was a mere reaction, violence remains violence, and it is never in our favour”.²⁹ The protesters’ violent approach backfired on them, weakening the movement’s popularity among the Lebanese.

The Return of Old-Fashioned Politics

Few weeks after the eruption of the protests in October, PM Saad Hariri resigned. He justified his decision as a bid to induce a “positive shock”.³⁰ This was viewed as a populist move intended to show that he stood with the people against the March 8 coalition, which is dominant in Parliament and the Cabinet. In reality, Mr Hariri’s resignation was one of the few victories secured by the protest movement. But even this win came to nought: His successor, Hassan Diab, was not able to tackle the political and economic chaos, and was forced to step aside after the Beirut port blast.³¹ The protesters’ dashed hopes were brought full circle when, almost exactly a year after he stepped down, Mr Hariri nominated himself to the position for premiership, and managed to secure the post. For all their actions, disgruntled Lebanese have failed to eject their inept political class.

Conclusion

Lebanon’s sectarianism has prevented the Uprising from achieving its objectives. Instead of uniting against a common foe, each community viewed the protests as a tool to weaken its opponents. One of the main objectives of the protests was the establishment of a civil state and eradication of the confessional system. The Christians, for example, rejected this call because of fears about their minority status and how their political influence would be eliminated by such reforms, if effective. Most of all, they were horrified by the prospect of a Muslim takeover of the political system, leaving them marginalised. The leaders of the Uprising have thus shown that they are incapable of forming a robust alliance against the sectarian political class, and nowhere has this been more clearly demonstrated than by Mr Hariri’s decision to nominate himself as PM barely a year after being toppled. Their failure to come up with a credible reform plan, set aside sectarian objectives, and elect a capable leadership – coupled with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – were apparently responsible for protest fatigue among Lebanese, and thus their patchy involvement in the movement.

About the Author

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²⁹ LCPS, “Why Did the October 17 Revolution Witness a Regression in Numbers?”

³⁰ Martin Chulov, “Lebanon’s PM Saad Hariri Resigns as Protesters Come Under Attack,” *The Guardian*, October 29 2019, available on: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/29/lebanons-pm-saad-hariri-resigns-amid-angry-protests>.

³¹ The government of Hassan Diab, composed of technocrats named by March 8 coalition, is currently a caretaker government.

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