

The New York Times Company: "Lebanon Protests Unite Sects in Demanding New Government".

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Lebanon Protests Unite Sects in Demanding New Government

Lebanon's protests, the largest since its independence, have moved from fury over the economy and corruption to demands for a new political system.

BEIRUT, Lebanon — The two new protesters smiled for the camera on a rooftop over downtown Beirut, marking what felt like history with a selfie. The view was new to them: Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese of every sectarian affiliation danced and chanted in the street below, the little-seen Lebanese flag suddenly everywhere.

"The politicians told us that we hate each other, but we don't," said Fatima Hammoud, 23. "I'm from a specific sect. My friend is from a specific sect. But we're all here together for our futures and our children's futures. We don't want to live the way our parents lived."

Drawing as much as a quarter of the country's four million people to the streets, Lebanon's seven-day-old antigovernment revolt has outlasted government pushback, the beginnings of a sectarian backlash and bad weather. The largest and most diverse protests since the country's independence, they are also the most ambitious: Fueled at first by fury over economic conditions and corruption, the crowds now demand nothing less than a new political system.

"Revolution! Revolution!" the crowds chanted in Arabic, as DJs better known for their nightclub engagements than their political activism blasted revolutionary ballads from trucks groaning with boulder-sized speakers. "All of them means all of them!"

The chant referred to all of the politicians, whom the protesters want swept from power for stumbling into an economic crisis that threatens to savage people's wallets, jeopardize supplies of gas and bread and deepen the chronic dysfunction of daily life.

But it could have referred just as easily to the protesters, who have rejected Lebanon's usual sectarian straitjacket — the political order that pits the country's 18 officially recognized religious groups against one another in a ceaseless power struggle — to unite in scorn for the system.

When asked which sects they belonged to, Ms. Hammoud and her friend, Noor Maanaki, 21, implored a reporter not to identify their affiliations.

"We don't believe in that," said Ms. Hammoud, who has a degree in business and economics but has been able to find work only as a clerk selling women's accessories. "We're all Lebanese. On the streets, we are not Shiite or Sunni or Christians. We are citizens."

It was a striking statement for a country that, for most of its history, has been defined by sect, whether Shiite or Sunni Muslim, Maronite Christian or one of several other groups. From lowly

functionaries to president and prime minister, government offices are distributed by sect, and a sectarian civil war from 1975 to 1990 killed as many as a quarter million people.

Over the weekend, a sign could be seen bobbing above the crowd in downtown Beirut.

“The civil war,” it read. “1975-2019.”

The protesters say they are finished with their leaders, many of them former civil war-era warlords who rule the country like a series of personal fiefs to be plundered, dispensing the spoils to loyal followers. The richest 3,000 people in the country, including many of the politicians, earn a tenth of the national income.

“We need a whole new system, from scratch,” said Omar Kammoureh, 47, a car dealership employee who had brought his 7-year-old daughter, Lara, to the downtown Beirut protest on Monday. “It’s been a very bad 30 years.”

The government has been unable to provide 24-hour electricity, clean water or reliable internet. Many young Lebanese are well educated and multilingual, yet an economy that produces little but profits for banks and real estate developers has forced them to emigrate to find decent jobs. “I want my brother back from Canada,” read one sign in downtown Beirut on Monday evening.

Garbage overflows from landfills and perfumes the highways. Lebanon’s Mediterranean beaches are scattered with trash, its waters often too polluted for safe swimming.

When a swath of beloved mountain forests burned last week, it came as a disappointment, but not exactly a shock, to discover that the government had failed to maintain the firefighting helicopters that could have limited the destruction.

“If you wanted to give this a name, it would be the ‘uprising of dignity’ — people taking back their dignity because it’s so humiliating to be a citizen of Lebanon under this ruling class,” said Nizar Hassan, the co-host of the Lebanese Politics Podcast. “You know that the country can be doing much better than this, you know you’re not responsible for how bad the situation is, and yet these people just keep on dividing us and taking actions against our interests.”

The protests began last Thursday after the government announced a new tax on previously free internet-based calls made over popular services including WhatsApp, spontaneously igniting demonstrations from Beirut to Tripoli in the north and Tyre in the south.

From the start, the protesters included people from every religious background and class who did not spare their own communities’ leaders from mocking chants, the more unprintable the better. Though every major politician has now had his name conjoined to a curse word, one — involving the country’s foreign minister and aspiring president, Gebran Bassil, and his mother — has become the rude jingle of the revolt, its distinctive rhythm even spawning an operatic rendition.

“They should be in prison,” said Josiane Haddad, 23, a psychology student. “All of them, no exceptions.”

All week, a strange mood has gripped the country, hovering somewhere between a holiday and the mad scramble to prepare for a hurricane. People were euphoric, at first like schoolchildren granted a

surprise snow day and then like riders on an untested roller coaster, the drop somewhere out of sight.

Beirut's famous nightclubs were closed in solidarity, but in Tripoli and then Beirut, DJs performed to crowds under the stars. In downtown Beirut, where vendors turned up with corn stands and ice cream trucks, many took breaks from the dancing and chanting to smoke water pipes with friends.

The Lebanese anthem, rarely heard in normal times, played several times an hour. The Lebanese flag, which usually takes a back seat to the flags of individual political movements, adorned heads, cars and billboards.

For now, government and protesters are in a stalemate. The prime minister, Saad Hariri, announced a package of economic reforms on Monday evening meant to defuse the protests, including halving the salaries of current and former members of Parliament and requiring the banks to contribute \$3.4 billion toward the national debt. The WhatsApp tax had already been scratched last week.

The protesters' response: pure derision.

"People are in a totally different place," said Nasser Yassin, the interim director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut. "It's not about cutting expenses here and there. People are now demanding major change."

The United States called for "a frank discussion between the Lebanese people and their leadership about the future of their country."

"It will be up to the Lebanese people to decide whether these measures go far enough to satisfy their legitimate desires for a prosperous and thriving country free of the corruption that has undermined its potential for too long," Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker said in Washington on Wednesday.

But it is unclear how long the momentum will last. The authorities are nudging the country back toward normalcy, and Lebanon's deeply entrenched sectarian powers are already reasserting themselves.

Protesters have blocked roads around Lebanon with burning tires, overturned dumpsters, construction materials and even a mound of dirt in which protesters planted trees, but scuffles between security forces and protesters broke out in several places on Wednesday when soldiers attempted to reopen the roads. "Peaceful, peaceful — this revolution is peaceful," crowds facing off with the army on a highway north of Beirut chanted on Wednesday morning.

Pierre Fares, an engineer from Naccache, said it was the only way to keep pressure on the government.

"They think the people will go to sleep again in a couple of days," he said, "so we want to make them touch and feel the pain."

Banks, schools and many offices and stores are still closed, but the crowds may fade when people are forced to return to work.

The government is hoping that “in the next 48 hours this thing will just become a smaller, more hard core of left-leaning protesters who might hang around,” said Karim Makdisi, a political-science professor at the American University of Beirut, “and these will be easily dismissed at a certain point.”

The leading Shiite parties, Amal and Hezbollah, have spread rumors blaming the uprising on foreign interference, and some of their followers have gone out to attack protesters. Videos showing bands of Amal and Hezbollah supporters riding into Beirut on motorcycles on Monday night were enough to scare many protesters away, though the army quickly drove them away.

“It’s the first time we’ve dared to speak about politicians’ corruption, and now they’re trying to silence the people,” said Sina Olaih, 45, on Wednesday in the southern town of Kfar Roummane, where protesters chanted, “Muslim and Christian, we all came to free Lebanon from the thieves.”

Not far behind her stood an enormous banner, fringed with green Amal flags, featuring the face of the group’s leader, Nabih Berri, the speaker of Parliament. A group of young men sitting in front of it had warned protesters not to tear it down, Ms. Olaih said.

“Of course sectarianism is going to be difficult to overcome,” she said. “It’s not going to be one or two days. But at least we raised our voices.”