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María González-Úbeda Alférez\*

The capacity of endurance of the Lebanese  
sectarian system in its most challenging year

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## *The capacity of endurance of the Lebanese sectarian system in its most challenging year*

### *Abstract:*

*Although the outbreak of protests in October 2019, the deterioration of the economic situation which was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the blast in Beirut's port, plunged the Lebanese sectarian political system into its most severe crisis to date, the sectarian leaders, through their traditional strategies of confrontation and rapprochement and their clientelist practices, have managed to stay in control. Additionally, the difficulties the civil society is facing to structure itself as a political alternative may well be key to their survival.*

### *Keywords:*

*Lebanon, sectarianism, clientelism, civil society, COVID-19, Beirut blast.*

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## La capacidad de supervivencia del sistema sectario libanés en su año más difícil

### Resumen:

El estallido de las protestas, en octubre 2019, el deterioro de la situación económica agravado por la pandemia de la COVID-19 y la explosión del puerto de Beirut, sumieron al sistema político sectario libanés en su crisis más grave. Los líderes comunitarios, a través de sus estrategias tradicionales de enfrentamientos y reaproximaciones y sus prácticas clientelistas han conseguido mantenerse al mando. Además, las dificultades que está experimentando la sociedad civil para estructurarse como alternativa política también pueden haber resultado clave para la supervivencia de la élite política.

### Palabras clave:

Líbano, sectarismo, clientelismo, sociedad civil, COVID-19, explosión en Beirut.

## Introduction

The so-called October 2019 Revolution, born from the suffocating economic and political crisis which the Lebanese are going through, became a collective call for the fall of the sectarian power sharing regime that rules the country and whose clientelist and corrupt practices are considered by demonstrators as the main reason for the desperate situation in which the country is plunged.

The main demand of the people focused on the establishment of a technocratic government, independent of the traditional leaders, and which would take care of the most pressing issues of the economic crisis and assume the elaboration of an electoral law that would allow members of the non-sectarian political class to compete on equal terms with the old elites.

The protest represented a milestone in the attitude of the population towards the sectarian centres of power. For the first time, the Lebanese confronted their sectarian leaders in their traditional strongholds and criticized not only those of other communities but also their own. The slogan 'kellon ya`ani kellon' (all means all of them) became the motto of the revolution.

The demonstrations forced a change of government, but the composition of the new cabinet did not meet the demands of the protesters. Its members, although new faces and, for the most part, foreign to the political class, had been chosen once more by traditional parties, in this case, those which agreed under the current circumstances to share power.

This was the starting point of a year in which the Lebanese society and the ruling elite have had to face a series of crises that have been difficult to assume in such a short period of time. The country has seen its complicated economic and political situation aggravated with two unexpected events of strong impact: the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic and the explosion in Beirut's port.

On February 21, it was confirmed the first case of COVID-19; a Lebanese woman who had travelled to Iran, the main regional focus of the pandemic. Just eight days later, schools were closed, and restaurants and the airport followed shortly afterwards. On March 15, the state of medical emergency and general mobilization was imposed. From

the very beginning the management of the pandemic was characterized by widespread awareness, politically and socially, of the devastating consequences it could have in the country, economically weakened and with a fragile health system.

The outbreak of the pandemic brought initially demonstrations to a standstill. But by the end of April a new wave of protests took the streets of Tripoli, defying the curfew and focusing mainly on economic demands following the further deterioration of the situation for many families that had seen their income radically reduced while food prices had increase dramatically. The protesters decried that hunger would kill them before the COVID-19 did.

In June, civil society organizations resumed demonstrations with the initial demands which focused on the economic situation as well as on the need of a new political system. But they faced serious difficulties due to the decision of some of the traditional parties, now on the opposition, to actively participate and seek the spotlight with demands that broke the protesters' consensus and endangered the cohesion of the demonstrations.

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, an explosion of massive proportions took place in Beirut's port. Approximately 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate had been stored in its facilities for more than six years, with the knowledge of various authorities, but without anyone taking any decision about it, despite its high potential risk. The explosion destroyed the port's facilities and affected large parts of the city<sup>1</sup>.

The responsibility of the politicians in this catastrophe and their mismanagement of the crisis in the following days, led to a new outbreak of protests, but this time characterized by the people's fury and desire of revenge, evidenced by the gallons erected at Martyrs' Square in Beirut, with cardboard cut-outs of the main leaders, and the storming of various public buildings, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Popular anger, once again, caused a change of government, a situation which was exploited by the parties.

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<sup>1</sup> The death toll is estimated at around 200, while the number of injured has been approximately 6,000 and more than 300,000 have lost their homes. CHAHINE, M. "After the Beirut blast the Lebanese people have grown tired of being resilient". *Beirut Today*, August 15, 2020. Available at: <https://beirut-today.com/2020/08/15/beirut-explosion-lebanese-tired-of-resilience/>

This text will try to explain how, even in the current circumstances, the political elite, led by the sectarian leaders, has manoeuvred to stay in power using the same tactics that it has been putting into practice for decades and which combine periods of confrontation and division, which it takes to the streets, with others of close collaboration, in addition to the traditional clientelist practices. Finally, there will be some remarks on how civil society movements can, that were losing influence before Beirut's explosion, try to regain the initiative in favour of the reform of the Lebanese political system.

### **Confrontational strategies in the political discourse of sectarian leaders**

In the absence of an agreement between all the leaders on how to deal with the demands of the revolution, Hezbollah, which stood as the main defender of the status quo, and its allies chose to act independently and form a government of technocrats, who were not members of these parties but were close enough to them, in order to buy time in dealing with protesters. Saad Hariri and his traditional allies stayed in the sidelines.

Consequently, the elites split again due to the formation of the new government at the end of January. There was a breakdown of the consensus reached in the last months of 2016 with the election of Michel Aoun as president and Saad Hariri as prime minister and the formation of a national unity government. All of these had allowed a truce between the two antagonistic political blocs, established following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005<sup>2</sup>.

For his first speech as the leader of the new opposition, Saad Hariri chose a very significant day, February 14, the anniversary of his father's assassination. He used the occasion to appeal to the Sunni community: "The Future Movement is a major movement, the Sunni community will remain here and will go nowhere and the patriotic people will remain here and no one can intimidate them"<sup>3</sup>. He also used the opportunity

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<sup>2</sup> The blocks were dubbed March 8<sup>th</sup> and March 14<sup>th</sup> because these were the dates in which the members and followers of each of the opposing camps took to the streets in 2005 to support or oppose Syrian presence in the country.

<sup>3</sup> NAHARNET. "Hariri says Bassil is a "Shadow President", Decries "2<sup>nd</sup> assassination of Rafik Hariri". February 14, 2020. Available at: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/269170-hariri-says-bassil-is-shadow->

to make known who his allies were: Walid Jumblat's Progressive Socialist Party, the Lebanese Forces and his own Future Movement. He also announced that "the political settlement [with Hezbollah and its allies] has become something of the past"<sup>4</sup>. With both statements, he helped restore the political blocs of 2005.

The leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Gebran Bassil, a Hezbollah ally, answered him back a few days later pointing out "(Hariri's return to power) will be difficult and will take a long time"<sup>5</sup>.

Hezbollah's ties to Syria and Iran became once again one of the most relevant topics of the opposition's narrative. Hariri and his allies are fully aware of the sensitivity of this issue among their own followers. After it was confirmed that the first cases of COVID-19 in the country were linked to people who had travelled to Iran, it was not long before they accused the Shia group of having allowed this to happen by delaying the cancellation of flights between the two countries. Hariri urged to "close the doors in the face of coronavirus from whichever country it may come, brotherly, friendly, near or far"<sup>6</sup>.

For his part, Jumblat evoked ghosts from the past regarding Syrian control over Lebanon: "[Prime Minister] Hassan Diab is nothing. The strong leading couple is the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Hezbollah. They are in the government; they are the ones who will build a new Lebanon... which will be a Syrian province or could be a Syrian-Iranian province"<sup>7</sup>.

The distribution of responsibilities between the different members of government, determined by the sectarian power sharing system, became also a matter of controversy. Hariri accused President Aoun and Deputy Prime Minister Zeina Akar, who is believed to be politically close to the latter, of encroaching on the premiership's

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[president-decries-2nd-assassination-of-rafik-hariri](#)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> NAHARNET. "Bassil Hits Out at Hariri, Urges Salameh to Rein in Dollar". July 3, 2020. Available at: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/273040-bassil-hits-out-at-hariri-urges-salameh-to-rein-in-dollar>

<sup>6</sup> NAHARNET. "Hariri Urges Officials to "close Doors in Face of Coronavirus"". March 11, 2020. Available at: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/270016>

<sup>7</sup> HOLTMEIER, L., ALFAISAL, L. "Lebanese PM Hassan Diab "is nothing": PSP's Joumblatt". *Al-Arabiya*, May 1, 2020. Available at: [https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/05/01/Lebanese-PM-Hassan-Diab-is-nothing-.html?fbclid=IwAR0Fhe11INy8OPLk\\_shpivPLZS\\_vYicngyV-96oO3NVDpTkQKqz2kMjZbCg](https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/05/01/Lebanese-PM-Hassan-Diab-is-nothing-.html?fbclid=IwAR0Fhe11INy8OPLk_shpivPLZS_vYicngyV-96oO3NVDpTkQKqz2kMjZbCg)

jurisdiction by “trying to establish new norms [...] because the premier’s powers are enshrined in the constitution”<sup>8</sup>.

The return of the debate regarding the general amnesty law was perceived by the leaders and the parties as a new opportunity to reaffirm publicly their vindication of the interests of their own communities. Depending on which sect they represented, the parties showed their discontent for one or another clause. Hariri’s Future Movement believed it to be an injustice that 1,200 prisoners, many of them Islamists accused of various crimes but not yet convicted in court, would remain in prison. On the other hand, Bassil’s FPM considered them to be criminals and terrorists because some were linked to attacks on the security forces.

In contrast, Hariri’s party regarded Christians who had collaborated with Israel during the occupation and later fled to the neighbouring country as traitors, while most of the Christian parties, backed to include their return in the law.

These political disputes were then followed by the decision of the parties to participate actively and visibly in the protests which resumed once the restrictions to fight COVID-19 were eased. Their presence was felt through the emergence of a demand that was not voiced at the beginning of the revolution: Hezbollah’s disarmament. Back in October, the civil society, aware of the need to bring together people from all walks of life under common demands, chose to postpone an issue so controversial that it would have prevented the participation of the majority of the Shia community.

The call for immediate elections was another of the demands which was not part of the revolution’s initial agenda, but which started to be brought up mainly by opposition parties, generating division in the streets. On October, protesters demanded elections, but following a change in the legislation which would allow new parties of the civil society to compete in equal terms as the traditional elites.

Hezbollah did not stay in the side-lines either and orchestrated the participation of its followers in the new demonstrations. Sometimes, the group would not prevent its supporters from defending the group’s ideas through riots and even by appealing to sectarian sentiments with pro-Shia chants and even insults to relevant religious figures

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<sup>8</sup> NAHARNET. “Hariri says not seeking return as PM, slams deputy PM overpowers”. June 11, 2020. Available at: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/272501>



from other sects. However, in other occasions, it allowed them to join popular calls against the economic situation. For instance, on June 11 they joined the protests that followed rumours that the dollar exchange rate had soared to 7,000 LBP, sending a message to the government and especially to the Central Bank's governor, whom Hezbollah leadership would like to see replaced.

In this context of confrontation, the verdict of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), established in 2005 following the request of the country itself to United Nations, should have been issued at the beginning of August. The STL was set up to investigate the attack that ended with Rafik Hariri's life and to try those responsible for it. The judges' decision, which could lead to the conviction of people with ties to Hezbollah and the Damascus regime, was likely to become a political sticking point. However, everything changed before the date scheduled for the verdict, which had to be postponed, and did not have the impact that was expected due to the new political and social scenario.

### **Beirut's explosion and a new change of strategy: rapprochement for survival**

The explosion of approximately 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate last August in Beirut's port revealed the inability of the State and the political leaders to fulfil an essential duty: to protect all citizens over the interests of the elite and their communities. Multiple documents showed that various state institutions, linked to the sectarian political parties, knew of the existence of the dangerous material stored since 2014. For instance, President Aoun, conceded in a press conference to have been aware of the problem since three weeks before the explosion and to have given instructions for steps to be taken to solve it, though he acknowledged he had not followed up later on the matter<sup>9</sup>.

From the outset, political leaders supported an investigation to purge responsibilities. While the possibility of launching an international inquiry is still being debated, the government, days before its resignation, set up a local investigation. The independent media soon denounced the links to political groups of those in charge to carry out the

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<sup>9</sup> For more detailed information on the repeated complaints over the years to the authorities about the dangerousness of the stored materials, see: NAHARNET. "Officials long warned of explosive chemicals at Beirut port". August 8, 2020. Available at: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/274015-officials-long-warned-of-explosive-chemicals-at-beirut-port>



work<sup>10</sup>. Not without reason, as the judge in charge is proposed by the government and ratified by the High Judicial Council, whose members have been chosen by the political class.

In addition to questions regarding the impartiality of the investigation, there was a lack of state coordinated response for the relief and assistance to the victims. In 2001, a member of parliament proposed a law to create a new centralized national body to coordinate disaster and relief efforts. Some 19 years later, the law remains in limbo, as Lebanon's parliamentarians disagree over the body's prerogatives and its sectarian composition<sup>11</sup>. This meant that it was mainly the population by itself and civil society organizations the ones who organized groups to clean up the streets, provide basic relief and even assess the level of destruction of the buildings most affected by the explosion. There was no coordinated action coming from the state.

The popular anger against the sectarian political elite soon reached the streets and a large demonstration was organized on the Saturday following the explosion. It was marked not only by the demands for accountability, but also, according to the people who attended, by the need for revenge, symbolized by mock gallons, with cardboard cut-outs of the main leaders, erected at Martyrs' Square and the hashtag #HangThem trending in social media. The wide deployment of the state security forces contrasted with the lack of coordination to assist the victims in the previous days.

The protests brought Hassan Diab's government down, but far from being a first step towards a change in the system, it meant a new opportunity for a shift in the strategy of the elites back towards unity and, this time, with French endorsement.

In this new political phase that began after the explosion, the French president Emmanuel Macron decided to play a role of double mediation: on the one hand between the Lebanese and their leaders and, on the other, between the political class

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<sup>10</sup> Megaphone. "مسرحية التحقيق". Youtube, September 5, 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8d2PfZGhKEg>

<sup>11</sup> SALLOUKH, B. "What happens now to Lebanon's government? Here's why real reforms may be unlikely". *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2020. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/18/what-happens-now-lebanons-government-heres-why-real-reforms-may-be-unlikely/>

and the international community. On his first visit to Beirut, two days after the explosion, he took to the streets to tour the affected areas, something that no local politician had done yet and he promised he would not allow French aid to end up in the hands of the corrupted, a message he also transmitted to the political class, to which he demanded reforms. On a subsequent visit to the country, he would be more explicit in this regard, even threatening politicians with sanctions if no changes took place.

In his role as international mediator, the French leader started by coordinating a conference jointly with the United Nations, which was attended by several world leaders including the North American president, Donald Trump. During his second visit, Macron announced his intention to seek for additional international aid at a conference to be held in October that would focus on raising funds for the reconstruction of Beirut. However, he makes all foreign aid conditional on the formation of a new government of national unity in the shortest possible time, something rather unusual in Lebanon where the process tends to take time giving the difficulties of finding consensus among the elites due to the disparity of their interests.

Lebanese politicians, in general, do not oppose French requirements and following Diab's resignation they agreed on the need to resume previous consensus and unity and decided to appoint a replacement through the traditional channels, which means that the Sunni political elites were tasked with the decision as it is legally specified that the position should be held by a member of their community. Back in January, Hezbollah and its allies had not followed this procedure when they chose Diab without Sunni consensus. Even though several parties, including Hezbollah and its ally Amal, were expecting Hariri to return as prime minister and lead the new government, he did not accept the role but, together with the rest of the former prime ministers, decided on the successor. The choice fell on Mustafa Adib, former assistant to one of them, Najib Mikati. He also had the support of Macron. The French president contacted all political leaders across the sectarian spectrum to ensure their support for the candidate and to avoid a conflict similar to what happened in January.

On his second visit, which took place in late August, Macron set an ambitious schedule of reforms. The political class, aware of the need to act for its own survival, became overnight the main supporter of the program for changes in governance and the fight against corruption. It is striking, for instance, the enthusiasm displayed by one of the key

figures of the sectarian system, the parliament's speaker and head of the Shia party Amal, Nabil Berri, who "after leading the parliament for 28 years [and being one of the most controversial politicians] calls to fight against corruption, for electricity reform, for returning stolen money, for a non-sectarian electoral law, for an independent judiciary,[...]"<sup>12</sup>.

Nasrallah has been receptive to the French leader's proposal and has pointed out that Hezbollah will cooperate in the formation of a new government capable of initiating reforms and promoting reconstruction. And he has even been receptive to the idea of holding a constructive debate regarding a new political pact for Lebanon<sup>13</sup>. The Shia group believes that Macron can be a valid international interlocutor as he has repeatedly spoken against advocating for the fall of Hezbollah as a fundamental part of the strategy of the international community towards the Mediterranean country. He has even met with the party's representatives in his round of consultations with local politicians.

### **Clientelist practices as a key instrument for survival**

The key issue in the analysis of the possibilities for real change in Lebanon's political system revolves around a fundamental question: how much support do elites and their sectarian system of shared power still have among their communities? Although there is talk about a growing number of people who is disenchanted with the parties and their leaders, highly relevant researchers such as Bassel Salloukh suggest the existence of a silent majority which still back the parties, pointing out that "if they wanted to fill the streets with people they would overwhelmed anyone"<sup>14</sup>.

The loyalty that still exists towards sectarian leaders of a significant part of the population can be explained, not as much by ideology, but by sectarian economic policies based on clientelist practices. This has successfully prevented the formation of

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<sup>12</sup> Timour Azhan (@timourazhari). Twitter, August 1, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> FRANCE 24. "Hezbollah "open" to French proposal for new political order in Lebanon". August 30, 2020. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200830-hezbollah-open-to-french-proposal-for-new-political-order-in-lebanon>

<sup>14</sup> SALLOUKH, B. during his participation in the discussion "Crisis and uprising in Lebanon: the roots of the explosion", organized by Haymarket Books on August 21, 2020. Min. 42. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2otEIX9Eu8>

alternative ways of identification beyond narrow communitarian affiliations. It has prevented, for instance, the development of class consciousness among the population and facilitated co-optation of trade unions and professional associations.

Since the end of the civil war in 1990, the sectarian leaders, many of them former warlords, have used their political power to break down and divide up among themselves state institutions which provide them with public resources that they have used, since then, to feed their clientelist networks and not to provide services and infrastructures to Lebanese at large. Therefore, it is them through their sectarian organizations who take on the task of providing their own communities in order to overcome state inefficiencies, therefore building dependency on their leadership among the people. Consequently, “Lebanese are increasingly dependent on their leaders to obtain jobs, get hired by certain companies or simply gain access to hospitals and schools”<sup>15</sup>.

Despite the fact that protesters had placed this kind of clientelist practices financed by state resources in the spotlight, they experienced a revival due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of worsening economic conditions, the leaders could redeem themselves and get back their lost influence after months of demonstrations. The population, facing mounting economic difficulties and a health crisis, was forced to turn to sectarian leaders again. This situation allowed the elites to reaffirm their control over their corresponding territories and communities by resorting to this kind of practices which included the provision of much needed basic services.

The case of Hezbollah is especially noteworthy for its impressive resources, even though the Shia group mainly acquires its funds from Iran since it has traditionally remained outside the structures designed by the elites after the war for partisan control of public resources. Therefore, despite the crisis in which Lebanon is plunged, it has had access to a large budget, \$2.3 million according to group sources, to fight the pandemic<sup>16</sup>. This large sum has not been invested only to strengthen services for its

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<sup>15</sup> EL KAK, N. “A Path for Political Change in Lebanon? Lessons and Narratives from the 2018 Elections”. Arab Reform Initiative, July 25, 2019. Available at: <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/a-path-for-political-change-in-lebanon-lessons-and-narratives-from-the-2018-elections/>

<sup>16</sup> MIDDLE EAST MONITOR. “Lebanon: Islamic Health Unit disinfects southern suburb streets”. March 26, 2020. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200326-lebanon-hezbollahs-islamic-health-unit-disinfects-southern-suburb-streets/>

community, and thus appeal to the unity of the sect around its leadership, but also to provide governance support to the recently resigned cabinet and especially to the ministry of health, Hamad Hassan, one of the members of government sponsored directly by the organization.

In contrast to the Shia group's capabilities, the rest of organizations and parties have had to carry out more modest initiatives. State resources are now very limited and are under greater public scrutiny. Therefore, political parties have all sought for available funds elsewhere, mainly the budgets of municipalities under the control of the party as well as external resources from the important and influential Lebanese Diaspora<sup>17</sup> and ally countries. Some of the leaders are among the biggest fortunes in the region, so they are also able to draw on their own funds.

Nevertheless, clientelist practices during the pandemic have not been exempt, once again, of controversy. The prime minister said he had to suspend the distribution of social assistance when it was detected that the list of beneficiaries had been "booby-trapped in order to serve political and electoral goals"<sup>18</sup>. The list had been drawn up by the municipalities, which are in the hands of traditional parties and are considered key institutions to strengthen public support.

Following the explosion in Beirut's port, the political organizations of the sectarian groups launched several initiatives to help the victims. For instance, Hezbollah was very active from the beginning by collaborating in extinguishing the fire and cleaning the debris, in addition to providing aid not only in those neighbourhoods where they have more presence, such as El Khandaq el Ghamiq, but also in other areas such as Karantina, a working-class neighbourhood with strong presence of immigrants<sup>19</sup>.

For their part, Christian parties have established their own initiatives, especially considering the broad presence of their community in the most affected neighbourhoods. Groups such as the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb have helped the

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<sup>17</sup> To understand the role of the Diaspora in Lebanese political life, including funding, see:

FAKHOURY, T. "Lebanese Communities Abroad: Feeding and Fuelling Conflicts". Arab Reform Initiative, December 5, 2018. Available at: <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lebanese-communities-abroad-feeding-and-fuelling-conflicts/>

<sup>18</sup> AZHARI, T. "Worse than the war", *Al Jazeera*, April 19, 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/war-hunger-grows-lebanon-anger-200417222253896.html>

<sup>19</sup> Rana Sukarieh, emails to autor, September 10, 2020.

victims through their institutions and NGOs. Members of the first of these two parties, for instance, participated actively in the project Ground Zero in Mar Mekhayel and Gemmayze neighbourhoods<sup>20</sup>.

### **Civil society: in search of alternatives to sectarianism**

Nasser Yassin, director of the Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs, echoed the frustration of the protesters and social movements: “People often say it’s a weak state, but we also have very powerful leaders who know the rules of the game, and they know how to utilize the state and its resources”, he said. “They know how to use clientelist networks for their own gain. It’s not so easy to uproot the system”<sup>21</sup>.

Civil society organizations face significant difficulties to shape their demands and propose viable and attractive alternatives, especially for those Lebanese who face severe financial problems, worsened by the pandemic and the explosion in the capital, and who represent an easy target for sectarian clientelism.

Therefore, one of the key aspects is to work towards ending clientelist practices in order to debilitate the sectarian system. Accordingly, under the current circumstances, various groups of the civil society have thrown themselves into assisting the population. Their networks, many of them established following the revolution, have turned to be very useful for facing the needs of the population throughout these last months. In the medium term, another key objective is to prevent traditional parties from playing a fundamental role, with the assistance of foreign aid, in the reconstruction of those neighbourhoods devastated by the explosion.

However, the crucial challenge faced by civil society today is the need to organize politically and, above all, to designate leaders. Although, until now, “the egalitarian ethos of the movement and the reluctance of individuals to claim credit for it had been

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<sup>20</sup> Idem.

<sup>21</sup> HOLTMEIER, L. “Expecting the collapse: Meet Lebanon’s young political party ready to take power”. *Al-Arabiya*, June 5, 2020. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/06/05/Expecting-the-collapse-Meet-Lebanon-s-young-political-party-ready-to-take-power>

an advantage, because the action was on the street and each person's presence was itself a contribution, that period has ended"<sup>22</sup>.

The ideological diversity of the demonstrators makes the establishment of a single political movement unfeasible, although that should not prevent the emergence of several different political movements that can work together towards common objectives such as the approval of a new electoral law that would allow candidates outside the sectarian parties to participate on equal terms.

On addition to the need of establishing political structures, there is the debate regarding the importance of revitalizing the role of unions and professional associations, which have been under the influence of the sectarian elites for decades. "The examples of Tunisia and Sudan have shown the importance of unions in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy"<sup>23</sup>, highlights Bassel Salloukh. There are two possibilities, either founding new and independent organizations or building an internal opposition in existing ones<sup>24</sup>. Some changes have already started taking place. Certainly, the most symbolic was the victory of the demonstrators' candidate to lead Beirut Bar Association.

Finally, another key aspect to be addressed is how to prevent hijacking of demonstrations by political parties, as it happened most strikingly in June. Analyst Nadim El-Kak points out that the support by anti-Hezbollah bloc parties frame, somehow, protests as sectarian and "every time anyone has to mobilized, they have to justify that they are not affiliated to the political class"<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> AJJAN, G. "The leadership problem of Lebanon's protests". *Beirut Today*, April 29, 2020. Available at: <https://beirut-today.com/2020/04/29/leadership-problem-lebanon-protests/>

<sup>23</sup> MAUCOURANT, N. "Lebanese protests: the missing trade unions". *Le Commerce du Levant*, February 21, 2020. Available at: <https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/29632-lebanese-protests-the-missing-trade-unions>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> AYOUB, J. interview with EL KAK, N. "The second wave of the Lebanon protests". *The Fire These Times*, podcast audio, May 1, 2020.



## Conclusion

The sectarian leaders have taken the opportunity they have been given, after a very complicated year, to resume a strategy of unity and collaboration that allows them to stay at the forefront of the system and clears the way to international economic aid through French mediation.

The active mediation of the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who travelled to Lebanon just two days after the explosion, has breathed new life into the sectarian leaders. Despite his criticism of the political class and his threats of sanctions against the elites for corruption, Macron does not pursue a structural change in the system but only reforms that will curb corruption and improve administration. He maintains his support for the traditional political class, whose legitimacy he bases on the fact that they were democratically elected, and he has played an active role in the appointment of the new prime minister, who must now form a national unity government. The French head of state has opted for short-term solutions to avoid the immediate collapse of the country, but without taking into consideration the real need for profound changes that would allow its political, social and economic viability in the future.

The civil society should now focus on the next elections that, according to the plan put forward by Macron, should be held within a year. The various organizations should, to begin with, work together towards a reform of the electoral law that would allow them to participate on equal terms with traditional sectarian parties. However, they should not underestimate the need to establish parties with, firstly, independent and consistent programs representing real options for change that can appeal to a wide range of voters, and, secondly, characterized, regardless of its ideology, by their advocacy efforts for a redefinition of identity away from sectarian connotations.

*María González-Úbeda Alférez\**

PhD student in Arabic and Islamic Studies  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid