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From “Overthrowing the Regime” to “All Means All”: An Analysis of the Lebanonisation of Arab Spring Rhetoric

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Only a few hours after the start of 17 October 2019 demonstrations in Lebanon, protesters started to demand the overthrow of the regime under the slogan “all [of them] means all [of them]”. What does this slogan mean in Lebanon today, eight years after it was first launched? And how has the discourse of overthrowing the regime developed since 2011?

When I was a university student in 2011, I took part in several demonstrations calling for the overthrow of the regime. However, it quickly dawned on me that the immediate conditions for such a demand were not then available, making the slogan, without it being adapted to the Lebanese context, inappropriate relative to other countries. In this paper, I aim to revisit the 2011 campaign to critique it and highlight the reasons behind its failure. This is pertinent given its close affiliation with what have been observed in Lebanon since 17 October. In the last few weeks, I have had conversations with six people¹ who were active in the 2011 campaign and are involved in the current revolution. We discussed their understanding of the developments in the Lebanese political landscape since 2011, the accumulated experiences that have pushed the Lebanese public to revolt against the regime in a broad mobilisation that has been ongoing for more than two months. We discussed how the slogan “overthrowing the regime” has developed into its current formulation of “all means all” which is met with broad public resonance.

[embed]https://youtu.be/33m9gzixA4Y[/embed]

The 2011 campaign to overthrow the sectarian system

Influenced by the Arab Spring, especially the demonstrations that demanded the overthrow of the regime, Lebanon witnessed a protest movement comprised of thousands of people in the winter of 2011. Unlike Egypt, Syria, Libya, or Tunisia, where the overthrow of the regime meant toppling the president, in Lebanon, it referred to dismantling the entire political class that has ruled the country since the end of the civil war in 1990 – the same class that was behind the war and partook in its worst atrocities. The protesters viewed the regime as a confessional and power-sharing system put in place after the war, governed by sectarian leaders, and considered sectarianism to be the main factor hindering any

² From “Overthrowing the Regime” to “All Means All”: An Analysis of the Lebanonisation of Arab Spring Rhetoric



Arab Reform Initiative

prospects for actual reform. The demonstrators see the current leaderships are based on a sectarian division of power and wealth in the Lebanon by the country's various religious groups. Consequently, they agreed to the slogan "The people demand the overthrow of the sectarian system".²

Contrary to Arab Spring revolutions, the 2011 protests in Lebanon unfortunately did not persist for long, with the mobilisation lasting for hardly three months, and numbers ranging between hundreds and a few thousands. The movement failed to attract more protesters and remained confined to Beirut with sporadic protests held in other areas. It also failed to instigate any significant reactions from the Lebanese diaspora.

The failure of this campaign to incorporate a more substantial number of Lebanese citizens was a result of several factors that can be summarised as follows:

1. The majority of the young who participated in the campaign to overthrow the sectarian system were only meeting each other for the first time and lacked formal experience in protest organisation. Trust had not consolidated among participants in this mobilisation, and the strong presence of "8 March" political parties³ alienated many young people who supported the overthrow of the regime but opposed "8 March". Street mobilisation also lacked any significant influence or support on social media.
2. Lebanon was politically split between two camps, "8 March" and "14 March" movements – a division that was heightened by local and regional Sunni-Shia tensions. Assassinations were common in the Lebanese scene, prompting many to defend their sectarian group in order to protect themselves. This, in turn, limited the resonance of calls to dismantle the sectarian system.
3. To many young people, especially those who had lived through the 2005 transformations and expulsion of the Syrian military, Lebanon was entering a new phase and thus reform was still possible. More specifically, young Christians believed that Christian parties had not yet taken their time in power and could contribute to providing policy solutions.

³ From "Overthrowing the Regime" to "All Means All": An Analysis of the Lebanonisation of Arab Spring Rhetoric



4. The campaign was confined to Beirut and did not expand to other regions of Lebanon. This added more pressure on the youths who were active in Beirut as they were unable to attract more protestors from the rest of the country.
5. The slogan “overthrowing the sectarian regime” was too broad and had a high ceiling of political demands considering the number of people active in the campaign. It was, to some extent, imported from Arab revolutions and was not appropriate to the Lebanese context. It also did not come out of direct popular grievances, and thus the people, and perhaps some protesters themselves, did not take it very seriously.
6. While women participated in the campaign, women’s groups were not as active compared to 17 October revolution.

Nevertheless, in addition to popularising the demand to overthrow the regime in Lebanon, this campaign had some limited positive aspects, not least the creation of networks between groups and individuals from various backgrounds through discussion forums and various other activities. This allowed for small groups to form and remain active after 2011.

The 2013 anti-extension movement

Some Lebanese activists maintained alive the discourse calling for the overthrow of the sectarian system, whether through the media, or in demonstrations and other forms of mobilisation. After the previous parliament had decided to extend its term in 2013, violating the Constitution and the popular mandate granted to representatives, several groups launched demonstrations in downtown Beirut. This was the first time that the term “movement” was used to describe such activities. A media campaign was launched under the slogan #NoToExtension to pressure representatives to revoke their extension. The most prominent demand put forward was that parliamentary elections be held on time and on a proportional basis. This did not prevent the slogan of overthrowing the regime from resurfacing, despite the doubt about the movement’s ability to achieve the holding of the elections on time, let alone to overthrow the regime.

Unfortunately, the movement abated early on, without having any impact at the



political or the popular levels. Consequently, the slogan of overthrowing the regime had little effect. Parliament extended its mandate for two terms, and elections were suspended until May 2018. One of the reasons for the failure of this movement was the sharp rift between the Lebanese people over what was happening in Syria and Hezbollah's direct military intervention there. The moment was not appropriate to appeal to people and urge them to take to the streets and squares and demand parliamentary elections be held on time. The two main poles at the time, Hezbollah and the Future Movement, both supported the postponement of elections, and people only saw the matter as a political competition to reach an electoral law favoured by each of the existing political parties, or otherwise the postponement of an electoral contest that would then eventually take place.

Seeing people preventing parliament from convening on two consecutive weeks in October 2019 appears to be a significant development in terms of popular will, refusing to let unconstitutional laws pass. This is particularly the case considering the failed attempts to prevent parliamentarians from entering parliament in June 2013 to extend their term because of the small number of protesters and general apathy towards the extension.

The 2015 movement

The slogan of overthrowing the regime returned to the streets of Beirut in July 2015, on the second day of the "You Stink" movement which came in response to the failure of the government, led by Saad Hariri, to manage the waste crisis in Beirut and its suburbs. The demands to provide a solution to the waste crisis sometimes escalated to demands to overthrow the regime, as it became evident that the regime had failed and that there was no hope in reforming it. In summer 2015, a large movement led by independent groups and opponents of the ruling political class took place, with the streets and organised groups having by then become both more developed.

Among the most prominent features of this movement:

- The waste crisis was not a purely political matter but affected all groups of



society across multiple political and economic backgrounds, and thus the protest was against poor government performance.

- The groups that launched the movement, and those active in it, gained more experience which enabled them to surprise the ruling class and reach out to the people – especially the middle class.
- Social media played a vital role through the presence of individuals who are influential in the political and social space and who have a decent number of followers.
- The extension of parliament's term significantly contributed to fuelling anger among citizens and raising the ceiling of demands from government and administrative reform to overthrowing the regime.
- The slogan “all means all” emerged. It sought to address the entire political class without exception, including all sectarian leaders. This was the first time that this slogan was widely embraced by the Lebanese population. The slogan meant that every single member of the political class is implicated in corruption and mismanagement.
- The 2015 movement received broad media coverage, contrary to previous campaigns.
- The term “civil society” emerged more seriously in the Lebanese political landscape, and its members started to represent a trend that is independent of established parties. Many associations working on elections, governance and transparency, human rights, and the environment, were active during that period and found widespread responsiveness from the public.
- A new generation of young people emerged. Unlike their predecessors, they were liberated from the shadows of their sectarian leaders, marking the beginning of political emancipation.

The demand to bring down the regime remained unrealistic for most protesters. However, many of them continued to express this demand in their chants and slogans. Most were more interested in solving the waste crisis than in other political demands, and the street opted to avert any security incidents in light of the ongoing war in Syria and instability in several Arab countries. Therefore, the political ceiling of the demands remained limited to a solution to the waste crisis and the resignation of the Minister of the Environment.



After the Movement ended, there was a near consensus in discussions and dialogue forums between the protesters that it would have been more feasible to restrict demands further in order to achieve some political victories. Consequently, albeit implicitly, we considered that the course of bringing down the regime is a long-term goal, and that the Lebanese were still hoping that the system can be reformed or that its performance can improve.

Between the 2015 movement and the 2019 revolution

The ruling class continued in its approach, sharing the power and wealth of Lebanon, and did not undertake any measures towards reform, while problems in the country were conversely aggravated. The election of Michel Aoun as President, after more than two years of presidential vacuum, did not help improve the situation or provide any of the solutions the administrative, economic, and judicial bodies needed. Likewise, the May 2018 parliamentary elections did not constitute the critical turning point the Lebanese people had been anticipating to improve their living conditions as well as the country's economy. On the contrary, the elections reproduced the same political class, with Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement gaining a majority and forming a coalition government that then included all sides. The government did not address any of the crises faced by the country, particularly the economic one.

October 17 and beyond

While the 17 October revolution was the culmination of numerous experiences and did not emerge out of a vacuum, the moment that sparked it was nonetheless surprising to all.

I will narrate the events during the early hours of the night of 17 October and elaborate on them.

“I was aware of a call to protest at 7pm but was also invited to a discussion on the situation in northern Syria and the Turkish intervention at the American University



in Beirut. I preferred to attend the session till the end and then join friends and activists who had called for the demonstration in downtown Beirut against the imposition of new taxes by the Lebanese government. I joined the march from Riad Al Solh Square to Hamra and back.

After some time, I started to see faces reaching thousands in numbers. I thoroughly examined them and found out right away that: First, there were many faces who were new to the demonstrations, especially younger people and university students; and secondly, there was a level of outrage on the faces that I had never seen before in previous demonstrations.”

Contrary to what was being said, the 17 October revolution did not break out in response to taxes imposed on the use of WhatsApp, but rather because of countless government failures, widespread corruption, lack of services and the high rate of unemployment. Moreover, it was a response to the difficult economic and financial situation in the country, and the complacency of Lebanese politicians in addressing the crisis. Notably, 48 hours before, wildfires had spread across Lebanon, north to south, forcing the country to seek help to extinguish the fire from Cyprus and Greece.

Demonstrations spread to all areas in Lebanon, spontaneously coalescing around specific demands without any prior agreement or coordination: The resignation of the government, the formation of an independent government, and early elections. These became the objectives of the revolution.

Overthrowing the regime through “all means all”

In this round of demonstrations, the demand to overthrow the regime embodied in the slogan “all means all” was a radical shift. Since the first night of protests, Beirut echoed slogans calling for the overthrow of the regime, and soon all cities and regions that joined the demonstrations followed suit. Although “all means all” is an extension of the 2015 slogan, the difference this time is that whoever demands the overthrow of the regime actually referred to it in its entirety, that is, the Lebanese quota- and patronage-based system represented by the political



class mitigating the people's relations with the state. It meant overthrowing a regime that is based on the sectarian leadership that is widely seen by Lebanese as a symbol of corruption and theft. It also meant overturning the sectarian system to establish a civil-secular system that protects the individual rights of citizens before that of their sects, wherein the citizen's relationship with the state is immediate and does not require intermediaries through the sect or its leadership. Finally, it meant overthrowing the rent-seeking economic system that produced this crisis and replacing it with a productive economy.

There is no consensus among demonstrators about an alternative or a roadmap forward. It is clear, however, that the movement has severed its ties with the existing system. This was clear in the spread of protests of varying sizes to every region of the country. In conversations I had with several young people who were participating in the protests for the first time, in chanting "all means all" and demanding the overthrow of the regime, there was near unanimity that there is no hope in reforming the existing system, and therefore any authority that emerges should lay the foundations for a different system altogether.

The emergence of collective awareness and the new generation of youth

The debate over the process of overthrowing the regime and building another is contentious and still in its beginnings. However, there is little doubt that there a collective awareness has formed that believes in overthrowing the regime as a necessary course. Beyond Beirut, where I stayed since the first days of the revolution, I also visited Aley, Chouf, and Tripoli in the past weeks and found that the call to the overthrow of the regime has the same resonance across all regions. What is striking is that, if you were to ask most protesters prior to the revolution about any possibility of overthrowing the regime in Lebanon, the answer would be that it was unlikely. To the people engaged in the current movement, the historical moment of 17 October achieved two goals: confidence in popular demands that emerged during the revolution and the emergence of collective awareness among different social segments, especially the youth. In summary, this collective awareness is a set of political ground rules surrounding the revolution and a set of



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economic and social demands voiced by most Lebanese.

The youth played a significant role in spreading this awareness further. Young people taking part in the revolution today are considered its backbone, with most protesters aged between 18 and 25. These age groups have not lived through the periods of sharp political division their predecessors have, for example 2005 and its aftermath, nor do they have a memory of the war. It is this young generation whose experience mainly comprises unprecedented levels of corruption in the Lebanese state and the failure of most political parties to present serious alternatives, as well as periods of coalition governments in which the entire political system became complicit. Consequently, they have no connection to the existing regime and are ready and eager to overthrow it and establish a new system that meets their aspirations.

In many discussion forums in Beirut (Azarieh, near Martyrs' Square) I attended, something struck me about the older generation. There was a tacit agreement among them that this was a youth revolution; that they should allow the youth to play their role and take their space, considering that the war generation is somehow responsible for the past period. It is this same older generation that not only failed to confront the corrupt leaders but even applauded and re-elected them.

This young generation is fully aware that the responsibility for change is now theirs. The average age of the attendants in daily and weekly meetings which we conducted to prepare for activities is around 30 years. This reflects that young people are the ones taking the lead in most cases, whether in street mobilisation or in political discourse and awareness.

Lebanese Women

This revolution may be one of the most critical periods in which Lebanese women exercised their political role in the history of Lebanon. Women have been ever-



present on the front lines during potential confrontations with the security forces and the army, emphasising the peacefulness of the revolution and seeking to prevent any clashes between demonstrators and the security forces. They have emerged as activists and lecturers on economic, social, and political issues, and as a prominent face for actors on the ground.

This is not to say that women had been previously absent from political action, but there is no doubt as to the significance of gains made and the different roles women played in this revolution. The recent shift can be attributed to efforts by women's organisations and groups in recent years in defending the rights of Lebanese women and demanding change, prompting many to now claim that the Lebanese revolution is a feminist one. Feminists may, in fact, be the most revolutionary element to this movement as they have also challenged the misogyny pervasive in Lebanese society.

As an example of this role, after several attempts by the parties in power⁴ to reassert a sectarian discourse and incite division between areas of Lebanon, women's groups succeeded in gathering mothers from Chiyah and Ain al-Remmaneh⁵ and rejected the rhetoric of sectarian strife and conflict, condemning attempts to draw young people into violence and a return to civil war discourse. In the Lebanese south, Nabatieh and Tyre, most of the women marches brought together the demands of the revolution with those of Lebanese women, as did women in the north, in Tripoli and other regions.

The course of the revolution and a new social contract

Our previous failures to challenge the political system in Lebanon may have culminated in a moment such as this; one in which the Lebanese people, from the north to the south, are confronting the ruling class and challenging the regime.

No one knows what course the Lebanese revolution will take or whether it will achieve its goals. The ruling class has adopted a tactic of stalling and have not been sufficiently serious in comprehending recent developments or responding to them. It is clear, however, that a large segment of the Lebanese public is moving

11 From "Overthrowing the Regime" to "All Means All": An Analysis of the Lebanonisation of Arab Spring Rhetoric



Arab Reform Initiative

towards producing a new political class to run the country. Perhaps more importantly, it is now evident that this segment has overthrown, or at least transcended, the old conceptions of ruling in Lebanon.

Some questions, however, remain unanswered: will a new economic and political reform package in Lebanon suffice to resolve the current crises? Do we need to instantiate a new political system, a new social contract and a modern state 100 years after the establishment of the country? Will the “all means all” campaign constitute the final blow to the ruling regime, or are current developments in Beirut and other regions merely one round of struggle among many against the ruling class and the regime? Will the struggle be renewed if the revolution fails to achieve all its goals in the foreseeable future?



Endnotes

1. Six activists that I have known from protest movements since 2011.
2. An interview I conducted with France 24 in 2011 about the campaign to overthrow the sectarian regime, link: <https://observers.france24.com/ar/20110308-lebanon-protests-demonstration-against-confessionalism-beirut-democracy-arab-revolution>
3. A political coalition formed by Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement (Michel Aoun) and other allied parties.
4. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement.
5. Area of greater Beirut that consist of both Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods.



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About the author

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