

# While the “October Revolution” of Lebanon continues...

Yazının Türkçesi için burayı tıklayabilirsiniz.

**Türkçeden İngilizceye çeviren:** Sena Aydın

\*\*\*

The revolutionary uprising of the masses that started on October 17, 2019 against the government's IMF-supported austerity policies still continues in Lebanon. Saad Hariri government has been trying to implement austerity policies since April 2019 in order to create an exit from the economic crisis in favor of the country's bosses. As part of this plan, the aim was to implement capitalist policies such as the further withdrawal of the state from public spending, cuts in public wages and increase in the tax burden of the working people.

This austerity plan for the Lebanese was the departure point of the rebellion against the current order for the working people, who have already been experiencing serious difficulties in accessing electricity, clean water and healthcare, and whose purchasing power had already declined due to the economic crisis. On October 17, two developments took place that spontaneously led the masses to go out on the streets and gave a start to the revolutionary process in the country. The first was a government announcement that apps such as Whatsapp that allow making internet calls would be taxed \$0.20 per day. The second was a fire that started in the country's largest forests on the night of October 13-14. Due to the privatization of public resources and their use for the benefit of the bourgeoisie, the government failed at adequately responding to the fire, which ended up damaging the Lebanese nature in a significant way, causing the destruction of nearly 3 million trees and the burning of an area that was about 1200 hectares.

That is to say that, during the mobilization, the Lebanese workers were questioning the capitalist destruction policies and the resulting injustices in income distribution as well as poverty and unemployment. As implementers of these policies, the government and the current sectarian regime in the country were the primary targets of the masses on the streets. In other words, blamed was regime that was the built with the support of imperialism following the Taif Agreement that was signed in 1989 in the aftermath of the civil war that took place in the country between 1975 and 90... This regime aimed at occluding all class and social conflicts in the country behind a veil of sectarian distinction. The country's administration was shaped accordingly as well, thanks to the proposed Constitution. For instance, the Constitution stated that the President had to be Maruni Christian, while the Prime Minister had to be a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Assembly, a Shiite Muslim. The leadership of these groups, who were the arms merchants of the civil war era, transformed into bourgeois bosses thanks to this "new order," and began controlling a significant portion of the country's economic resources. They became the implementer of the capitalist neoliberal policies in Lebanon in collaboration with imperialism. They added wealth to their wealth through practices of favoritism and massive corruption, all shaped by sectarianism. It was precisely for these reasons that the Lebanese workers, who took the streets on October 17, demanded the construction of a secular order against the existing sectarian regime. The integrated nature of the economic, democratic and social demands of the Lebanese masses, who appeared on the stage of history with the desire to not be ruled as before, gives the revolutionary process in the country its continuing character.

## **The continuing nature of the mobilization**

The uprising that started on October 17 quickly spread to a large portion of the country. Masses filled the squares in important cities of the country such as Beirut, Bekaa, Tripoli, Nebatiye, Sur and Zouk. In face of the quick spread of the uprising, the government had to take a step back and withdrew its plan to tax Whatsapp and similar applications used for internet calls. However, this government pullback did not make the masses leave the streets and return back home. The anger of Lebanese workers, youth and women was already aimed at the government that tried to suppress the uprisings through violence. Realizing

that he could not hold onto power in the face of these intense mass mobilizations and strikes, the Prime Minister Saad Hariri had to announce his resignation on October 29. This was the first major victory of the revolutionary mobilization of the Lebanese workers.

Following the resignation of the government, the main debate among the ruling bourgeois blocks was on how to get the sectarian regime out of this revolutionary process with no harm. The entire bourgeois leadership, who secured their economic interests thanks to the sectarian character of the regime, tried to “soothe” the masses with the promise that the new government to be formed for the sake of not “plunging the country into chaos” would make certain reforms. However, the continuation of the deepening economic crisis in the country, as well as of the austerity policy implementations that the capitalists use to make the workers pay the bill of the crisis resulted in a quick loss of belief among the masses in the “reform” promises made by the order parties.

According to the data from the previous year, the country’s gross domestic product was 51 billion dollars, while the amount of public debt had reached the level of 86 billion dollars in the first quarter of 2019. The bosses implement wage decreases by showing the crisis as an excuse, and the number of workers who were fired in the last 4 months amount to 160 thousand. At the same time, the purchasing power of the working people has melted due to the depreciation of the Lebanese lira against dollar by about 60 percent combined with the increasing inflation. Even the World Bank had to announce that 50 percent of the Lebanese population will be pushed below the poverty line if the economic situation in the country continued in this way. In addition, banks set limits on foreign cash transfers and imposed restrictions on the amount of foreign cash that the Lebanese could withdraw from their accounts.

For the working masses, who have started feeling the effects of the destruction caused by the capitalist exploitation policies in combination with the economic crisis even more plainly, banks and the banking system at large that allowed the bosses and power holders smuggle money abroad while trying to seize the money of the common man, became the targets of the uprisings as well. At the same

time, new slogans have been developed against the political parties and their representatives that tried to keep the sectarian regime alive: “Let them all go!” “Let’s bring all corrupt leaders to account!”

Such was the atmosphere in which the new government was established on January 21, in the aftermath of Saad Hariri’s resignation. The masses continued mobilizing against the government and the regime from its very first moment of establishment while the bourgeois order parties and sectarian structures that dominate Lebanese politics are all united around the new government so as to protect the regime. The fact that the new government established under the leadership of the former Education Minister Hassan Diyab receives the most support from Hezbollah and Maruni Christian deputies is a case in point.

## **Possible dangers awaiting the revolutionary process**

Historically and during recent revolutionary uprisings, we have witnessed time and again the kind of methods used by the bourgeois order parties to precipitate the withdrawal or defeat of the mass movements during revolutionary processes where the class struggle has risen, given that the former’s interests are inherently tied to the survival of the current capitalist system of exploitation. The revolutionary process in Lebanon is not immune to the possibility of facing such counter-revolutionary methods. Indeed, the state and regime forces have already tried to implement many of these methods throughout the process.

One of them is violence and repressive policies used against the masses, and the sectarian policies used by the state apparatus and paramilitary forces. In Lebanon, the army and the police forces arrested hundreds of people as they forced the mass mobilization to retreat using tear gas and plastic bullets against the masses. Furthermore, the armed sectarian groups of the civil war era had gained a legitimate status before the state by becoming legal political parties after the civil war, however, some of them still have their own armed paramilitary forces. Perhaps the most important of these is Hezbollah. While it received the most votes in the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections, it proved itself to be

one of the leading counter-revolutionary actors of the region in the revolutionary process in Syria once again. Even though the paramilitary forces of Hezbollah and similar groups have attempted to attack the mobilization, the masses have been able to stand their ground against these sectarian attacks.

Obviously, violence is not the only method that Hezbollah and similar sectarian political groups could use so as to burn out or divide the mass movement, especially considering the fact that the political system of Lebanon was built on sectarianism in collaboration with imperialism. As said before, almost all structures with hidden paramilitary forces inherited from the civil war times have their own political parties. There are social and economic solidarity organizations established by these sectarian parties in order to expand and consolidate their own bases within this political spectrum shaped by inter-sectarian divisions. A function of these organizations is to cover the dynamics of class- or social-based struggles rising within the working-class by instrumentalizing sectarian distinctions. Another one of their functions is to try to sooth discontented people within their own base through favoritism and financial aid. However, as these sectarian organizations are all intertwined with the capitalist system through their political parties, financial institutions, bosses etc., the economic crisis has shaken their foundations as well. The diminishing share of the cake caused by the economic crisis brought the concentration of capital in the hands of the bourgeoisie of this type of sectarian organizations while increasing corruption. This, in return, led to the questioning of the sectarian regime and its leaders in the eyes of the Lebanese workers and opened the path towards the development of the dynamics of social and class struggle.

Sectarian political structures, whose interests depend on the survival of the regime, are trying to influence the masses politically by changing tactics and attempting to infiltrate into the mobilization. The regime parties resort to democratic reactionary methods. For instance, the rhetoric of the new Prime Minister Hassan Diab is a textbook example of this situation. Diab emphasizes that the country is going through an important process and ensures that they will prepare a more democratic election law in order to address people's dissatisfaction towards the regime. While the masses are seeking an exit from this order via mobilizing for their economic, democratic and social demands, the

sovereigns, who strive for the end of mobilizations to ensure the continuation of the capitalist exploitation system, try to channel the revolutionary process towards elections, ignoring the economic and social demands of the workers.

Another approach that can be described as dangerous for the course of the revolutionary process in Lebanon is the proposal developed from within the mass movement by the old Stalinist, new civil society mindsets, which follows the stagist understanding of revolution: the withdrawal of the sectarian parties from the government, the establishment of a more “democratic” order with the coming to power of technocrats, and economic reforms over time. The message of the reformists to the masses that seek an alternative to the capitalist economic model and its regime is this: “a better capitalism is possible.”

Mass movements experienced the results of these above-mentioned dangers during the first wave of the revolutionary process that started in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010: Muslim Brotherhood governments based on sectarian foundations, democratic reactionary methods in case of Tunisia, and the counter-revolutionary methods of the regime, regional countries, radical Islamists and of imperialism in the case of Syria.... Mass mobilizations in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran in 2019 constitute the second wave of the revolutionary process in North Africa and the Middle East, considering their demands, methods of struggle, vanguards and character. Despite the efforts of the regime forces to sheer the revolutionary mobilization away from its course, the determination of the Lebanese workers in their struggle for their demands is proof that the masses advance in light of the lessons learned from the first revolutionary wave in the region. However, a revolutionary leadership still has not emerged from the mass mobilizations that occurred in Lebanon or in the region. As revolutionary internationalists, our duty is to offer political, organizational and programmatic support to the struggle of the Lebanese workers in line with the lessons we learned from the first wave of uprisings.

**“Let them all go!”: A workers’ government is possible!**

The uprising that spontaneously broke off on October 17 has been going on for more than four months despite all the maneuvers of the regime. Even though there occurred partial withdrawals in the process, the fact that the Lebanese masses have been mobilizing for a considerable period of time reveals their anger towards the capitalist system of exploitation and the regime.

The latter is also visible in the demands of the masses and how they have evolved over time. The uprising that started spontaneously under the leadership of workers, women, the youth and the unemployed still continues while generating, again in a spontaneous and unconscious fashion, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian demands. Demanding the eradication of injustice in income distribution, targeting banks and the capitalist economic model, asking for the elimination of the sectarian regime which serves as the lifeblood of the imperialist capitalist order, seeking the construction of a secular regime, and saying “let them all go..” all these indicate that the masses are targeting the current order.

It is precisely at this point that it is necessary to be able to delineate a regime/power that could guarantee a break from the current order and favor workers’ politics independent of capitalism, because it is not possible for the masses to protect their own achievements or to secure their demands under the rule of the bourgeois parties.

The only way out is the construction of a political and organizational form that could lead the struggle of the masses along with an urgent action program. Such a program of urgent action needs to orient the democratic, economic and social demands of the masses towards a perspective of breaking away from the regime, imperialism and capitalism. Let them all go! Nationalization of all banks and privatized public institutions without compensation! Construction of a central and planned economy. Establishment of independent public committees to fight against corruption and to prosecute those who were involved in it under the supervision of these committees. Establishment of defense committees to prevent the attacks of sectarian and counter-revolutionary groups on the mass mobilization. Disengagement from the sectarian regime and creation of an independent and sovereign constituent assembly to form a new constitution in

favor of workers, women, and the youth. A program that includes such a list of demands would improve the perpetual nature of the struggle of the masses as well as making the construction of a workers' government possible.

It is crucial for the Lebanese revolutionaries to bring together the masses and their local coordination and self-organization organs such as neighborhood committees around an urgent action program with such perspective in order to advance the revolutionary process in the country and to break away from capitalism and the regime. The ability to construct such an alternative in Lebanon will be decisive in the fate of mobilizations of workers who are fighting for similar demands both in the region and in the world arena.

February 25, 2020