

Crisis In Lebanon

Lebanon was once a jewel of the Mediterranean coast. But now the small country is most widely known for war - its own history of bloody civil conflict and violence that unfolds across its border in Syria. Unrest there continues with tens of thousands of anti-government protesters taking to the streets over the weekend.

But Lebanon is also facing a new and different issue. Its environment is being destroyed on almost every front.

Lebanon is drowning in its own garbage. Beirut and its suburbs alone generate more than 3,000 tons of trash per day, according to government figures. The Mediterranean coast is contaminated with raw sewage.

in 2017 as temporary landfills bulged, politicians feared protests would erupt again. So they pushed for the land reclamation project, calling it a stop-gap solution.

It is a form of land reclamation – the process of adding to the coastline. In this case, the process involves dumping thousands of tons of trash directly into the sea. The project uses trash taken from a nearby dump site as the fill material for creating new land, dumping thousands of tons of trash directly into the sea. reports of this project last year indicate landfill sites will extend hundreds of meters into the sea upon completion, and will have a surface area of 600,000 square meters in total. What they appear to be doing here is taking a pretty undesirable landfill site and turning it into an even less desirable landfill site — which is destined ultimately to act as a big source of marine pollution.

Some scientists estimate 1,000 to 3,000 tons of plastic are floating on the surface of the Mediterranean, with more added every year. The government usually requires an environmental impact assessment before such waste disposal projects can go ahead. But in this case, keen to speed the project through, it allowed the developer to start the project before the study was finished.

Elsewhere factories dump waste into rivers. Old diesel cars and generators spew carcinogens into the sky. Open trash dumps burn in the countryside. And just recently, mass wildfires tore across forests and mountains.

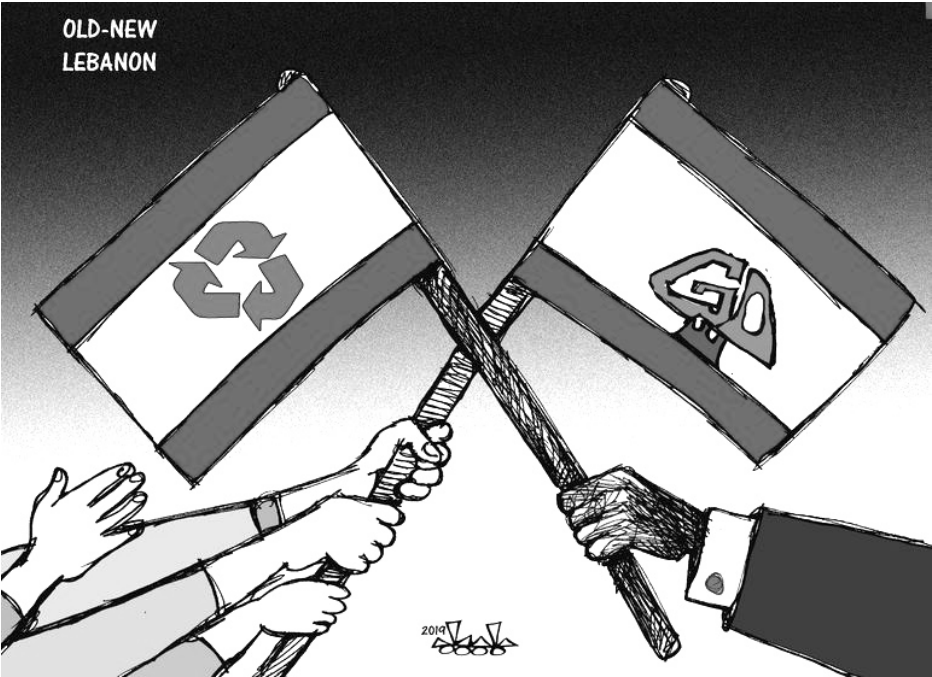
In the fertile plains of the Beqaa Valley, home to vineyards and much of the country's agriculture is Qaraoun, one of Lebanon's biggest man-made lakes. The lake used to irrigate agricultural fields. But these days, it's too contaminated for that. There are heavy metals and other pollutants from hundreds of factories that dump into the river that feeds it, along with sewage from nearby villages. The government has tried to restrict pollution. But for now, the lake is thick and syrupy. It smells and is full of cyanobacteria that turns the water green. Most species of fish here have died.

the country's environment minister, Fady Jreissati says his biggest challenge is fighting what he calls cartels - politically connected business groups that are involved in waste management and quarrying.

He claims they can buy influence with the media - or worse. Some activists who oppose the many illegal quarries in Lebanon's mountains have received death threats.

Despite the environmental problems, Jreissati says a draft state budget makes his ministry the second-worst-funded in the Lebanese government, just US\$8 million. But Jreissati's own policies have also frustrated environmental experts. With most of the country's landfills almost full, he supports a plan that includes burning waste to make electricity. Najat Saliba, the scientist with the American University of Beirut, warns this could worsen Beirut's air quality, which is already many times more polluted than the World Health Organization recommends. The previous governments have proven to be incapable of doing any emission control.

From reporting by **Ruth Sherlock**
NPR.ORG



Prime Minister Resigns After Mass Protests

Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri has turned in his resignation to President Michel Aoun, satisfying one of the main demands of the country's protest movement.

The announcement came on the back of 13 days of mass protests demanding the departure of the country's entire political elite amid growing anger over official corruption, poor public services and years of economic mismanagement.

"We have reached a deadlock and we need a shock in order to brave through the crisis," Hariri said in a televised statement from the capital, Beirut.

"I'm heading to the presidential palace to tender the resignation of the government ...

This is in response to the will and demand of the thousands of Lebanese demanding change"

The two-week crisis has paralysed Lebanon, closing banks, schools and some businesses.

Rami Khouri, a senior public policy fellow and journalism professor at the American University of Beirut, described Hariri's move as a "huge victory" for the protest movement and a "critical turning point".

"The question now is will this trigger a process by which Hezbollah, which is the critical player in the background, as well as the president and his party ... will those people agree to a technocratic government, which goes on to the next step of the demands of the protesters?"

Naim Salem, a professor at Notre Dame University, said the next step was for Aoun to appoint a replacement for Hariri.

"The need now is to put [together] this new cabinet, [with] people that have the highest level of integrity ... there will be much give and take, much pulling of strings between the major political parties in the country."

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A Political Order Built On Religious Factionalism.

Religion has shaped Lebanon since it gained independence from France in 1943.

In this multicultural country of Muslims, Christians and Druze – a medieval faith derived from Islam – religion defines membership and belonging. It is woven into Lebanon's economic, political and social fabric.

The mass protests that began in mid-October over a proposal to tax WhatsApp calls are challenging that tradition. Over a million Lebanese from all faiths have joined together in these leaderless and nationwide anti-government demonstrations, in which the agenda has now expanded from avoiding taxes to regime change.

“All of them means all of them,” protesters nationwide chant, demanding the ouster of Lebanon's entire ruling class.

Protesters blame Prime Minister Saad Hariri, along with Lebanon's Christian president and Shiite parliament speaker, for rampant corruption, a wrecked economy and a ravaged environment.

In repudiation of the idea that religious allegiance comes before national unity, they are demanding fair elections, a stronger judiciary and more government accountability.

Hunger Has No Religion'

With 18 recognized sects – including the **Maronite Christians; Sunni, Shiite and Alawite Muslims;** and the **Druze** – Lebanon is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the Middle East. When a class struggle broke out there in the mid-1970s, it quickly devolved into a civil war between right-wing Christian and left-wing Muslim militias.

To end Lebanon's conflict, the 1989 Taif Accords required all factions to relinquish their weapons and distributed government positions to politicians of different faiths.

This power-sharing agreement has kept the peace in Lebanon. But it has also given it a political order built on religious factionalism.

Patronage networks run by the “za'eem,” as Lebanon's powerful sectarian leaders are called, protect the interests of their religious communities, doling out favors both legal and illegal. All faiths have their own za'eem.

Religiously based governance has given Lebanon both extreme national debt and staggering inequality. According to the World Inequality Database, the richest 1 percent of Lebanese own approximately a quarter of the nation's wealth. Lebanon's infrastructure is crumbling. Power outages are a chronic problem even in urban middle-class neighborhoods.

Widespread human rights violations – including domestic violence, child labor and abuse of Syrian refugees – are rarely punished.

But, according to the political scientist Bassel Salloukh, Lebanon's rulers “use sectarian mobilization to camouflage intra-sectarian socioeconomic disparities” – a divide-and-conquer strategy meant to stop class solidarity from emerging.

The beneficiaries of this system argue that Lebanon's stability hinges on this sectarian balance. And, indeed, sectarianism has been remarkably effective in forestalling dissent for the past 30 years.

It has also instilled a deep distrust in government. A recent poll shows that 96 percent of Lebanese think political corruption is endemic.

The Sectarian Construct

By drawing the boundaries of inclusion along religious lines, Lebanese sectarianism has impeded the rise of more unifying ideologies like nationalism or secularism.

“Sectarianism has been depicted as a monolithic force, unchanging in the face of history,” historian Ussama Makdisi wrote in his 2000 book “The Culture of Sectarianism.” But, he continues, “sectarianism was produced. Therefore it can be changed.”

Like protesters in both Tunisia and, more recently, Sudan – who pushed out religiously divisive leaders in hopes of nurturing a more secular democracy – Lebanon's protests challenge a tired western stereotype that the Middle East is an intolerant, naturally authoritarian place.

Hezbollah No Exception

In recent days, demonstrators who support Hezbollah have protested the inclusion of their leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in

the movement's calls for regime change. They say accusations of corruption against this powerful Lebanese political and social force are evidence of a conspiracy by Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States.

Violence erupted on Oct. 29 when Hezbollah supporters attacked demonstrators, re-opening key roads blocked by protester encampments and setting their tents on fire.

Still, the uprising grows. Past violence has failed to quell protests, as have offers from the government to cut lawmakers' salaries by half and tax banks to relieve national debt.

Prime Minister Hariri's resignation opens the door for real change in Lebanon, **but protests will likely continue.** The za'eem system means Hariri's replacement may well reinforce the same power-sharing model.

The current grassroots protests build on the momentum of a 2015 uprising called the #YouStink movement. Those protests began when Lebanon's main landfill was shut down and mounds of trash filled the streets of Beirut, but they came to embody numerous other causes: Children marched for climate action. Feminists defended the rights of domestic workers. In 2018, women ran for office in Lebanon record numbers.

Rebuilding a Nation

There is an academic theory I like about how nations are built, called “cultural intimacy.”

It holds that communal acts like breaking bread together, say, or self-deprecating humor play a crucial role in creating a shared citizenry.

Lebanese protesters formed a 105-mile human chain connecting geographically and religiously diverse cities across the country Oct. 27th. The 1.5 million Lebanese Sunnis, Shias and Christians who have for weeks been walking side by side, holding hands and raging against the system are not merely protesting. They're building a society that works for them.

- Mira Assaf Kafantaris
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