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What's left of Lebanon's 2019 uprising?

This weekend's Lebanese elections likely won't break sectarian neoliberal parties' grip on power. That's also because the left is too weak and divided

The Lebanese parliamentary election is taking place this weekend, more than two years after the uprising on 17 October 2019, and a little less after the criminal explosion that destroyed the port of Beirut and large sectors of the capital in August 2020 and killed more than 220 people.

These elections come amid a deep economic and social crisis. The national currency has lost nearly 95 per cent of its value since October 2019, while prices have risen by more than 200 per cent and about 80 per cent of the Lebanese population is now living below the poverty line. Nine out of ten people struggle to support themselves because of low income and six out of ten people would leave the country if they could, according to a recent UN report prepared by the Special Rapporteur on human rights and extreme poverty, Olivier De Schutter.

The international and regional media have presented this election as a decisive battle for the future of the country, while large segments of Lebanese citizens in- and outside the country have expressed high hopes and expectations. More than 130,000 Lebanese expatriates have already voted. This is the equivalent to 60 per cent of the non-residents who registered for this election. This rate is slightly above that of 2018, which stood at 56 per cent. However, important obstacles stand in the way of progressive and radical change in the country as a result of this election.

The dominance of sectarian neoliberal parties

In the absence of any mass progressive and secular political alternative, the ruling and dominant sectarian neoliberal parties — from Hezbollah to the Lebanese Forces — will still most likely be able to rally their confessional bases and maintain, or reinforce, their hegemony. These

sectarian neoliberal parties have various instruments and tools to conserve their domination in large sectors of the society, alternating forms of consent and coercion.

Different sectarian neoliberal parties have exploited the current election as another opportunity to deliver services to particular neighbourhoods and local populations in order to win their votes.

For example, they exploited privatisation plans and their control of ministries to consolidate networks of patronage, nepotism, and corruption. Moreover, the continuous intensification of the economic crisis and the ensuing Covid-19 pandemic offered new opportunities for them to deliver services, such as campaigns to distribute food or fuel oil and sanitise public spaces — and their image at the same time.

In this context, Hezbollah has been one of the main actors benefiting from the financial crisis, mostly as a result of its wide network of institutions and access to resources, which have increased steadily since the late 1980s. It is, however, not the only party engaging in such practices, albeit not on a similar scale. Different sectarian neoliberal parties have exploited the current election as another opportunity to deliver services to particular neighbourhoods and local populations in order to win their votes.

At the same time, these parties have also intimidated opponents. In fact, several Shi'a opposition candidates in the Beqaa Governate have renounced to run in the election after family pressures and threats by Hezbollah supporters. A report published by the Lebanese Association for Electoral Democracy (LADE) in the end of April denounced practices such as vote-buying, pressure and threats on candidates, abuse of power and public resources in election campaigns.

The weakness of the left

The persistent absence of mass non-sectarian and progressive organisations and parties rooted in Lebanon's popular and working classes is another shortcoming of Lebanese politics. Their absence was already a significant weakness for the protest movement that emerged during the October 2019 uprising, and its capacity to genuinely act as a challenge to the neoliberal sectarian parties and their system.

In the election landscape — except for the constituency of South Lebanon III — the various left and progressives groups are running on different electoral lists, repeating in many ways the fragmentation

witnessed during the protest movement. More generally, left-wing and progressive forces have not been able to constitute a united front that would be able of channelling the Lebanese people's demands and aspirations, whether during the protest movement or the electoral campaign.

The chances for radical and progressive change in this weekend's elections are rather slim.

At the same time, the more liberal and right-wing sectors of the protest movement, such as the Bloc National, have made electoral deals in several regions with sectarian parties such as the Kataeb. They also joined together with former deputies, who are often businessmen and formally part of sectarian neoliberal parties. They are now portraying themselves as reformists or supporters of the October 2019 uprising.

The elites' legitimacy

The weakness of trade unions is another recurring problem. After the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, the country's elites actively contributed to weakening independent and combative trade union movements. They also co-opted the main federations of trade unions, firstly the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (GCLW) in 2000, and the Union Coordination Committee (UCC) in 2015. The prospects of cross-sectarian mobilisation and the development of class-based movements are considered — rightly so — as potential threats to all the country's sectarian neoliberal actors. The CGTL and UCC have not played any role in the Lebanese Intifada of October 2019 and in this election.

Finally, the Lebanese sectarian system with its laws and political framework, which are shaped along religious and patriarchal lines, is crucial to the continuation of divisions within society and therefore to the rule of sectarian neoliberal elites. Similarly, the Lebanese electoral system constitutes a deterrent to the development of class politics from below contesting the sectarian, neoliberal political system and its ruling elites.

In this context, the parliamentary electoral system is still a tool to institutionalise sectarianism and reproduce as well as consolidate the significance of sectarian identity. This is why, among other reasons, small leftist and progressive sectors involved in the uprising have advocated to boycott the elections to avoid giving legitimacy to such a political system and its ruling actors.

In sum, the chances for radical and progressive change in this weekend's elections are rather slim. Instead, the dominant sectarian neoliberal parties will probably be able to reclaim some legitimacy, both locally and internationally.



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