CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

Social Movements and revolutionary episodes in the Mediterranean

The Lebanese case and its broader implications

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Illustration by Carole Hénaff

How have revolutionary episodes and grassroot movements reconfigured the socio-political landscape in the Mediterranean? And what are the common features and new transversal trends that have shaped the politics of contention in the region? In this article we focus on the complexities of Lebanon's 2019 uprising, commonly framed as *thawra* or revolution, and reflect on its significance for the broader scene of contentious politics that has shaped the Mediterranean in the last decade. In the conclusion, we briefly explore how the trajectory of Lebanon's uprising and its broader connotations hold key lessons for new civic alliances in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership twenty-five years after.

Lebanon’s uprising or *thawra*

On October 17, 2019, a phenomenal protest movement called the *thawra* or revolution broke out in Lebanon. In the wake of an announced WhatsApp tax, protesters took to the streets in various cities and rural towns across the country. People called on all politicians to resign, decrying decades of corrupt governance. Within days, Lebanon’s government resigned. Yet, this resignation could not quell people’s longstanding dissatisfaction with the country’s politics of sectarianism that has enshrined clientelism and deepened the gap between the ruling elite and ordinary citizens. Protesters gathered in Lebanon’s key urban squares calling for the eradication of the sectarian regime and its institutions. Given that protests were to a large extent fueled by a financial crash, much of the popular resentment was directed against the banks and financial institutions. Indeed, the *thawra* was fundamentally concerned with discrediting the political economy of sectarianism that has enshrined greed and impunity. Still, it soon became a site for cross-cutting struggles. People staged contentious performances that focused on highlighting solidarity and common grievances[1]. Also, as Lebanon’s trade unions and syndicates are mostly either defunct, feminist organizations, youth-led, and grassroots collectives took the lead in organizing some of the uprising’s mass performances. Feminist groups staged regular protests throughout Lebanon, denouncing the patriarchal nature of the political system that enshrines its authority by restricting rights for women. Grassroots organizations started convening nation-wide meetings to discuss the establishment of new collective organizations that would replace politicized professional associations.

> The government’s resignation could not quell people’s longstanding dissatisfaction with the country’s politics of sectarianism: protesters gathered in Lebanon’s key urban squares calling for the eradication of the sectarian regime and its institutions

Looking at the graffiti and slogans that protesters used is central to understanding Lebanon’s latest revolutionary episode. All slogans had intersectional messages that sought to demonstrate the negative consequences of Lebanon’s political regime on people’s everyday lives. Slogans denounced political parties, sectarianism, homophobia, social injustice and the sectarian-led “pie-sharing” system. At the same time, they referred to stifled women’s, LGBTQ, refugees’, workers’ and domestic migrants’ rights[2].

Central to these protests’s repertoire was the attempt to reclaim the right to the city and to occupy streets and public squares. In Beirut, they stormed the famous egg building which is an abandoned cinema in central Beirut. On the inner walls of the old building, they painted and sprayed graffiti which reflected citizens’ discontent while acting as mobilizing ideas for the uprising. Protesters have also stormed the *Grand Theatre* in the Center of Beirut, an iconic building that has been abandoned for decades. By taking over those abandoned spaces, they sought to reclaim the Center of Beirut that has come to embody political

securitization and neoliberal gentrification since the end of the 1975-1990 Civil War. By reclaiming the right to the city, protesters were keen on reappropriating urban spaces, creating new spatial imaginaries and geographies delinked from the power of the sectarian state.

It is against such a background of elation mixed with bitter resentment against Lebanon's governing powers that Lebanon's uprising unfolded. As soon as the revolutionary episode erupted, a hotbed debate about its nature and significance animated public, student, and academic spheres. Teach-ins and deliberative committees in Central Beirut reflected on whether this episode of contention was surprising or inevitable in the light of accumulating grievances. Scholars and activists engaged in intellectual discussions as to whether Lebanon's uprising could evolve into a historical revolution that would see the dismantlement of political sectarianism or whether this was only a fleeting episode of popular dissatisfaction that would be soon crushed by the sectarian regime.

Needless to add that public opinion was polarized at the outset of the protests as to whether Lebanon's mass uprising ushered in a phase of complete overhaul or whether governing powers would soon "hijack" the protest scene by deploying their strategies of co-optation and control. Notwithstanding this, it was clear that Lebanon's so-called 2019 *thawra* did not emerge in a vaccum, and that it is to be positioned in the recurrent failings and abuses of the post-war state[3]. Indeed, citizen grievances that usually inspire revolutionary episodes were ever-present features in the daily practices of Lebanese citizens[4]. Novels, films, blogs, poems, intellectual conversations in coffee shops or bars expressed tremendous dissatisfaction with corruption and lack of access to public services such as water and electricity. Since the end of Lebanon's Civil War, the political regime has been reluctant to embrace legal and political reforms that would weaken its infrastructural power. It is no exaggeration to say that there has been no significant rotation of power since the end of the war as the same governing elite cartels and their allies have monopolized access to institutions. According to many surveys, Lebanese citizens are one of the most highly dissatisfied citizenries worldwide. They particularly feel alienated from their political establishment[5].

In this context, it became clear that Lebanon's model of political sectarianism, which reproduces itself through a corrupt public sector, governmental deadlocks and politicized deals over internet, oil and electricity is not only resistant to change but also detrimental to citizens' own aspirations [6]. The desire to emigrate in search of employment opportunities after graduation, dissatisfaction with state services and alienation from the prevalent culture of clientelism are regular grievances that the Lebanese youth have recurrently voiced[7].

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This time however, a major mobilizing grievance revolved around the economic collapse which discredited the so-called system of sectarian “pie sharing”. Since the end of the Civil War, the ruling political and economic elite have monopolized the redistributive power of the state in their hands[8]. Thus, they had built tentacular and wide-ranging networks of profit and clientelism, blocking ordinary citizens’ access to welfare and rights. With the financial crash that saw the Lebanese pound lose more than 80 percent of its value within months and as people lost access to their savings in the banks while the political elite were getting richer by the day, protesters identified an opportunity: Generate grassroots support for a protest movement that would transform Lebanon’s political system.

A complex protest trajectory amid concurrent crises

The architecture of Lebanon’s protest wave, however, soon changed. In no time, security forces had deployed their apparatus of control. Also the so-called “thugs” who belonged to some of Lebanon’s governing parties started demobilizing the crowds by fueling acts of violence. Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, protests contracted though they have never fizzled out. As soon as Lebanon’s first nation-wide “lockdown” elapsed back in spring 2020, protesters returned to the streets. Nonetheless, protests became more fragmented, and some of the demonstrations took on a more violent character. Angered by unofficial capital controls, slashed salaries and endemic unemployment, some groups attacked banks and high-end shops.

Indeed, with the fall of the Lebanese pound and the decline of livelihoods compounded by the procrastination of political reforms, it is no surprise that a reverse process of demobilization replaced the initial protest wave that was hopeful of quick breakthroughs against the regime. At the heart of this reverse process was deep disenchantment with the ruling elite. Formed in January 2020, Lebanon’s new government, which was tasked with inaugurating a political transition and ending the financial crisis, could not enact any tangible reform. Political factions have mulled over an economic rescue plan that was supposed to be presented to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Governing parties clashed over the size of the financial losses that were to be submitted to the organization. Also, it soon became clear that the appointed government was hostage to overriding geopolitical and sectarian pressures.

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On the 4th of August 2020, in an apocalyptic scenario, two blasts that were due to the storage of 2700 tons of Ammonium Nitrate in the Beirut port led to the eradication of entire districts in Beirut and to the death of more than 200 people and to more than 6000 injuries.

Largely ascribed to the political establishment's negligence, the blasts exemplify the failure of Lebanon's sectarian system and of the post-war republic that saw a political culture of impunity and unaccountability prevail. At the same time, the blasts brought along many challenges that are likely to make mobilization against the political regime a Sisyphean task. In the wake of the blasts, people are concerned with survival and with reconstructing their destroyed homes, businesses, and neighborhoods. As Lebanon is grappling with successive crises ranging from the economic collapse to the destruction of Beirut's infrastructure and entire neighbourhoods, more than half of the Lebanese population has become "trapped in poverty"[9]. Within this climate, the politics of economic rescue, relief and reconstruction has become the most pressing item.

Interpreting the Lebanese uprising : beyond the binary of a failed or successful revolutionary episode

In this context of overlapping calamities, and one year after the outbreak of Lebanon's 2019 uprising, we are bound to reflect on the implications of these protests. Many questions come to mind: How can we explain the fact that –even though the protests were iconic- they could not lead to the "fall of the regime" as protesters were initially hoping? And – one year later after their outbreak—has the protest cycle ended?[10]. The answer is complex. Lebanon's uprising has so far not been able to overthrow an extremely robust regime that has managed over time to consolidate its strategies of control. Based on the allocation of political offices according to sectarian quotas, the regime encourages the rise of competitive coalitions that are supposed to coexist in the name of national unity[11]. Governing powers process rivalries instead of implementing reforms. By encouraging fragmentation, the political system reifies the power of the "sectarian" state at the expense of the "social" state. In so doing, it creates a tentacular politics of dependency whereby the so-called followers expect rewards from their communal leaders (Zu'ama) in exchange for their electoral obedience. Also, the system invites external interference, making any homegrown attempt to challenge the system hostage to external powers[12].

To understand why the 2019 protests, even though they were unprecedented, have not led to dismantling the system, we need to account for the set of strategies that the political class has used to demobilize the wave of contention. Key tactics consisted in conjuring narratives of civil war and discord, and positioning Lebanon's collapse within a broader "conspiracy affair" instigated by regional and international agendas[13]. Most importantly, as new forms of poverty and dispossession arose in the wake of the economic collapse, key political parties repositioned themselves as the main " "governors" and "saviors" in times of "faltering national solutions"."[14].

> We are called to understand its trajectory rising beyond the reductionist view of whether the uprising has led to dismantling the system or whether it has failed to accomplish its goals: revolutionary episodes bring along various symbolic

> transformations that are key to understanding long-term change

Notwithstanding this, upon interpreting Lebanon's wave of contention, we are called to understand its trajectory through another perspective, rising beyond the reductionist view of whether the uprising has led to dismantling the system or whether it has failed to accomplish its goals[15]. As George Lawson reminds us, revolutionary episodes bring along various symbolic transformations that are key to understanding long-term change[16]. In the Lebanese case, the protest wave has instigated profound symbolic and societal transformations. Today, grassroots groups are assiduously working to establish new collective and people-centric platforms and organizations. A myriad of alternative news outlets have challenged Lebanon's politicized and elite-led media industry[17]. Most importantly, many activists perceive Lebanon's *thawra* as a daily way of life that needs to be sustained over time regardless of immediate gains[18].

In a nutshell, this wave of contention has led to a critical reassessment of Lebanon's state-building trajectory, shattering the prevalent myth that a social pact built around sectarian power-sharing could sustain and enhance the prosperity of its citizens. It is crystal clear today that Lebanon is in dire need of a new political pact that is citizen-driven rather than concocted by sectarian gatekeepers or *Zu'ama*.

In lieu of a conclusion: Broader implications of the Lebanese case for the Euro-Mediterranean approach

Lebanon's uprising has key implications for understanding the transversal and complex dynamics of contentious politics in the Euro-Mediterranean zone. Over the past ten years, the Mediterranean has seen a cascading wave of revolts. Led by social, feminist and youth activists, waves of contention have had wide-ranging reverberations[19]. Fuelled by social disillusionment and failed expectations, they have put into question prevalent economic and political "ways of doing things". Episodes of contention have however led to a plurality of outcomes. Some of these movements have partially succeeded in integrating their proposals into the political system. Some have had to contend with counter-revolutions and authoritarian backlash. Others have fizzled out.

Regardless of their immediate outcomes, their temporalities and spatialities point out to the existence of cross-cutting forms of contentious politics across both shores of the Mediterranean. In Europe, social disaffection with liberal democracies and collapsing economic pacts have coincided with the anti-regime revolts in the Southern Mediterranean. At the same time, these cross-cutting waves have unfolded against the wider backdrop of uprisings and protests in Asia, the Americas and Australia.

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> been systematically marginalized in both policy and public spheres

Two key features that are present in the Lebanese case characterize these waves. Firstly, going beyond mere mobilizations, they reflect a practical and experiential engagement with conceptions and practices of democracy. Secondly, they are strongly driven by socioeconomic and sociocultural demands[20]. Revolutionary episodes have called for participatory rights and for deep transformations that would reverse and unmake manifold policy and economic legacies. Embedded within broader economic and global crises, they have brought to the fore new revolutionary actors such as youth-led, feminist and LGBTQ groups who have been systematically marginalized in both policy and public spheres.

Within this climate, a new vision for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership can no longer gloss over the transversal interdependencies underlying these movements and their implications for ways of *carrying out research* and *doing policy* in the region.

First, relegating those waves of contention to terminologies such as the “Arab Spring” or anti-austerity movements in Europe glosses over both the commonalities and contextual realities that these episodes unravel. Global, national and local mobilisations are in a constant process of interaction. Here we are called to break away from standard approaches and static terminological constructs, and to consider the interactional, multi-state and multi-scale character of these processes[21]. In this context, informal waves of civic activism, focused on local and community mobilisation and aiming to change (or to put in place) democratic conditions have gained ground. Along with established NGOs in the region, they have recast understandings and norms of politics. An arising challenge is how to build bridges between traditional and new forms of civic engagement to support sustained collective efforts for structural change[22] New policy approaches ought to account for the complex demands for inclusive and participatory citizenship in local societies. They also require flexible and adaptable Euromed support alongside complementary models for funding civil society[23].

Secondly, rather than focusing on the immediate outcomes of these uprisings, we are invited to explore their trajectories as laboratories of new and ongoing social trends. It remains to be seen how these movements will impact long-term society-state relations. Even though these movements may not have dismantled existing political systems as challengers had hoped for, transversal and transformative debates will undoubtedly go beyond street politics, becoming resilient and enduring demands[24].

> A vibrant Euro-Mediterranean civic space is called to privilege a transcontexual and transnational conception and practice of democracy

As various scholars have already demonstrated, our assessment of transformations in the Mediterranean ought to transcend reductionist definitions that confine revolutionary episodes to the binary of *democratization* versus *authoritarian backlash*[25]. New forms of activism, as shown in the case of Lebanon, are transcontextual and intersectional. They are linked to the reconceptualization of legal rights and to cross-cutting economic and societal struggles. From this perspective, looking at them through the narrow lens of *failure* versus *success* ignores the wide ranging discursive, symbolic and practical complexities that democracy may take. Ignoring such aspects and concentrating on the formal procedures of democracy may indeed overshadow the substantive transformations that aspire to change longheld discursive, institutional and material policy legacies.

As the Lebanese *thawra* reminds us, mapping and accounting for the symbolic and societal impacts of these contentious waves, and their implications for new generations of activists arises as the priority. It is precisely this ongoing societal process of transformation that makes these revolutionary episodes unique. In this regard, waves of contention have so far not only challenged political incumbents but have forged and unsettled societal values and identities[26].

Taking critical stock of the complex and transversal values that emerge from ongoing waves of contention should be at the core of future relations between Europe and its southern neighbours. The Euro-Med Partnership is called here to integrate both in its policy narratives and templates the idea of a shared and transnational conception of democracy defined as a claim, a practice, and a personal demand that is affecting all of us as citizens in a globalised and interdependent world[27]. To achieve a more inclusive and transformative Mediterranean alliance, regional partnerships ought to account for common civic goals and fields of cooperation around social transformation. This endeavour calls for replacing old policy approaches that have looked at Europe and its neighbourhood through the lens of a dichotomous *North-South* perspective. Instead, a vibrant Euro-Mediterranean civic space is called to privilege a *transcontexual* and *transnational* conception and practice of democracy.

To conclude, in the last twenty-five years, the Euro-Med approach has privileged a North-South perspective in conceptualizing contentious politics and democratization on both shores of the Mediterranean. This Euro-Med approach has been hostage to binaries and paradoxes. It has also had little traction on the ground. The EU has focused on supporting democratic transitions in the Southern Mediterranean countries, while promoting stabilization and security. Nevertheless, the results of the EU’s democracy promotion agenda have so far remained modest[28]. Despite its longevity, this agenda has not challenged existing autocratic political regimes. Rather, it has invigorated them. Adding to this, Euro-Med policy priorities have heretofore positioned the youth in the Mediterranean as key actors at the heart of societal change. In practice however, the balance sheet resulting from the promotion of youth cooperation schemes has remained rather disappointing[29]. The Euro-Med project faces on the one hand the challenge of reconfiguring its multilateral and bilateral instruments. Also, a transformed Barcelona process can no longer apply the same assumptions and conceptions of social change.

To better respond to regional and local realities, the Euro-Med partnership is called to become *reflexive* [30] and *transcontextual* rather than *reactive* and built on regional "silos". Also, it is to become more attuned to evolving circumstances that build bridges rather than walls between uprisings in the Southern Mediterranean and social movements in Europe.

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