

# Mass protests against failing infrastructure shake Lebanon

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Thousands have taken to the streets of Lebanon's capital Beirut over two successive weekends to protest the mountains of trash that have lain uncollected for weeks. The authorities have responded violently, with the police firing tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, as well as live ammunition, and beating up the demonstrators, killing at least one person and injuring hundreds.

The demonstrators' calls for a solution to the waste crisis have morphed into demands for the provision of basic services such as electricity, water, decent roads, higher wages, elections, and an end to the country's corruption and sectarian-based system of government.

The failure of Lebanese infrastructure and the escalating sectarian tensions are tied to the imperialist-backed sectarian war in neighbouring Syria, which has devastated Lebanon as well.

In addition to its 4 million nationals, Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per head of population in the world. There are around 500,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants, and more than 1.1 million Syrian refugees. The Syrian refugees, most of whom are young, face appalling conditions. Living in informal tent settlements (Lebanon refuses to designate them refugee camps for fear they become permanent) and in daily fear of eviction, they cannot legally find work. Most work informally for a pittance.

Dubbed "You stink," the demonstrations against the breakdown of Lebanon's infrastructure are a graphic symbol of the far wider breakdown of the entire political system.

Politics have been dominated in the recent period by the Saudi-sponsored and largely Sunni Muslim Forward Movement and its allies, known as the March 14 Alliance, led by Saad Hariri, now in self-imposed exile in Paris, and the Shi'a militant group Hezbollah

and its allies, known as the March 8 Alliance, backed by Syria and Iran.

There have been no elections since 2009. Parliament has twice extended its own term, with new elections now due in 2017, despite failing to meet since May 2014. The government, a fractious coalition of the March 8 and 14 Alliances whose allies are on opposite sides in the bitter sectarian war in neighbouring Syria. Headed by Tammam Salam, it has failed to pass a comprehensive budget in 10 years. The country has been without a president since May 2014, as the political factions failed to meet to agree a nomination on 23 separate occasions.

Such is the fear that the political crisis may spiral out of control that none of the imperialist or regional powers have spoken out publicly about the demonstrations.

The protests began after the government closed Beirut's landfill site on July 17, 11 years after its scheduled closure, and when it was full to capacity, without an alternative. Following an online crowdfunding campaign by a group of activists and NGOs to raise \$2,000 for banners and posters, and a social media campaign whose success took even the #YouStink organisers by surprise, around 10,000 protesters turned out on Saturday August 22. The number doubled the following day.

Some protesters, widely believed to have been provocateurs, destroyed buildings and property in the recently rebuilt downtown of Beirut. After a brutal crackdown by security forces over the weekend that left at least one person dead and 343 people injured, according to the Lebanese Red Cross, organisers called off the demonstration set for August 24.

The government ordered the erection of a concrete blast wall near the Prime Minister's office in

downtown Beirut. However, so great was the public opposition to this and the police brutality against a peaceful demonstration that the authorities were forced to dismantle the barrier just 24 hours later, adding to the ever-widening contempt for the government.

The government then rushed to select bidders for new waste collection contracts in the country's six governorates. That only served to exacerbate the crisis, as the deals were widely seen as having been awarded corruptly to incompetent cronies. The very next day, the cabinet cancelled the contracts, citing exorbitant rates.

Thousands more took to the streets this last weekend in protest, shouting anti-government slogans and calling for the resignation of the environment minister, new elections and a calling to account of the interior minister for police violence the previous weekend.

While the #YouStink organisers appear to have no broader objectives beyond a solution to the garbage crisis, the demonstrations—encompassing a wide range of groups across the sectarian divide—have taken on a life of their own. Many people interviewed by the media spoke of wanting an end to the sectarian-based politics, the political elites and the corruption that have dominated Lebanon for decades.

The protests and the crisis of bourgeois rule in Lebanon are rooted in the machinations and wars stoked by the imperialist powers and their allies in the region.

Lebanon, a tiny country of 5.9 million people, has never had any real political independence. It was carved out by Britain and France, along with what are today Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and part of Turkey, from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire after the Ottomans' defeat in World War I. Along with Syria, it was ruled by France until 1943.

Since then, Lebanon has been a proxy battleground for influence in the region between the imperialist powers and rival regional states. No political event in Lebanon can be understood as a purely domestic issue.

Various powers whipped up conflicts between Lebanon's numerous Christian and Muslim sects; between the Lebanese and Palestinians who fled or were driven out of their homeland by Israel in 1948 and 1967; and between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to further their own agendas, leading to a 14-year civil war that ended in 1989. Jobs were and still are often restricted,

implicitly or explicitly, to a particular sect.

Lebanon's geo-strategic value in the eastern Mediterranean has increased with the recent discovery of offshore oil and gas reserves. Their exploitation requires a reliable government unequivocally aligned with Washington and subservient to Western oil corporations.

It has become a crucial staging post for the war in Syria, where Washington and its regional allies seek to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, as part of their efforts to isolate Iran and Russia, Syria's main allies, to defeat Hezbollah, and control the Middle East.

The northern port city of Tripoli has been the entry point for arms to Sunni jihadists in Syria and the scene of sporadic fighting between sectarian factions supporting different sides in the Syrian war. The Beka'a valley, where many Hezbollah supporters live, has become a transit route for weapons and fighters to Syria.

An impoverished state, Lebanon provides few public services. The situation deteriorated with the adoption of free market policies. As a result, access to essential services, education, health and housing is dependent upon faith-based and commercial provision, which exacerbates divisions.

But the key dividing line is class, not religious affiliation, despite the confusion deliberately generated by the division of Lebanon for electoral purposes into 18 officially recognised sects. Lebanon is characterised by enormous social inequality. Apart from a handful of billionaires and millionaires, the overwhelming majority of the population live in poverty, subject to water and electricity shortages, and food contamination.

More than half of all Lebanese able to work are unemployed, while around half of those in work are without a contract. Around 30 percent of university graduates are unemployed, prompting at least 40 percent of male and 20 percent of female graduates to leave Lebanon one year after graduating.



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