

OCTOBER 17 UPRISING

An Academic Perspective



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Preface

On October 17, the Lebanese people took to the streets in a united front against a government that had failed them. Grievances had been brewing for some time over a mounting fiscal deficit, high unemployment, the garbage crisis, and an economy depleted by corruption and a misappropriation of funds.

The tipping point was the imposition of a \$6 tax per month, on VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) usage – namely all free calls using the Internet – which, capping a long list of austerity measures, reflected the chasm that exists between the state and the citizens it is supposed to serve.

Insisting on a "peaceful revolution," or *thawra silmiyeh*, the protesters called for a set of reforms, starting with a non-sectarian, technocratic government, and a recognition of their human rights and dignity.

It is noteworthy that, at least in the beginning, Lebanese from all walks of life had agreed, publicly, on the legitimate causes and hardships that led to the uprising. Later, more camps started to emerge, with the monetary crisis exacerbating the situation. While some advocated for the revolution, others argued against it or against prolonging it.

LAU's academic body has been involved in various ways in what may come to mark a watershed in Lebanon's history: providing analytical commentary in social and mainstream media, holding teach-ins in protest sites, and at times marching alongside the youth.

By then, LAU Magazine had already closed the main issue in terms of content. Hence this supplement, which the Editorial Board hopes will provide some insight into the implications of the current movement as it challenges paradigms that would impact the Lebanese people's political, social, and economic lives.

October 17 Uprising: An Academic Perspective represents only a cross-section of the many voices and various backgrounds of our academic body.

The interviews have been edited and condensed for the sake of clarity.

The Lebanese Constitution of 1926

was adopted as an interim measure, to achieve a confessional distribution of power between the Christians and the Muslims, without specifying how the offices should be allocated.

The National Pact of 1943

is an unwritten agreement between President Bechara El Khoury and Prime Minister Riad El Solh. It was a compromise based on coexistence and power-sharing among the confessional groups with key positions allocated as follows: a Maronite president, a Sunni prime minister, and a Shia speaker of the house.

The Taif Agreement of 1989

also known as the National Accord Document, was negotiated to end the civil war and restore normality in Lebanon. Several of the clauses in the agreement were not implemented.

Al-Nahda (Arab Renaissance)

began in the late 19th, early 20th century in Egypt, spreading across the Ottoman-ruled Arab regions of Lebanon, Syria and other parts of the Middle East.

Michel Chiha (1891-1954)

a Lebanese banker, politician, writer and journalist, was one of the authors of the 1926 Lebanese Constitution. His ideas and actions are believed to have influenced the shaping of modern Lebanon.



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A Rigid System Unable to Reform Itself

We tend to blame all the ills of Lebanese society on sectarianism. Corruption, clientelism, discrimination, inequality, emigration, civil war and even external wars, we maintain, are a direct result of our sectarian system. The current crisis with its global dimension, however, may have shown otherwise. The protests we are seeing in Lebanon are very similar to protests all over the world against an establishment that failed to deliver on its promises.

Lebanon had reached the edge of the abyss and instead of jumping in, the Lebanese turned around and threw in it the politicians who got them there. People are in a euphoric revolutionary mode; their wrath is directed against both the political establishment and the system of communal power-sharing.

This system never actually complied with the 20th-century standards of secularism, homogeneity, equality of citizens, cohesiveness and sovereignty. More importantly, it has been out of tune with developments in international governance whereby state responsibility came to include the social and economic welfare of citizens incorporated in concepts of human rights. It is mainly inspired by a 19th-century arrangement between the Ottomans and the European powers that created an autonomous region in Mount Lebanon governed by a council composed of communal representatives in the aftermath of the 1860s civil war between the Druze and the Christians.



The formula was adopted on a temporary basis in the Lebanese Constitution of 1926 and subsequently in every other political arrangement in the country, including what was called the National Pact of 1943, and the 1989 Taif Agreement in the aftermath of the civil war. Nevertheless, at every step, local agency played an important part in influencing outcome: the Lebanese have always opted for coexistence – rejecting the creation of separate homogeneous cantons after 1860 – and lobbied for the creation of a more inclusive Greater Lebanon rather than a more exclusively Maronite smaller one. The crises of 1958 and 1975-90 were about the nature of the state, yet in both cases the outcome was to return to power-sharing.

There are of course many issues. The model is an understanding between elites who form an exclusive club that is difficult to penetrate by ordinary citizens; and the consensual mechanism often leads to paralysis. Most importantly, it also makes it difficult to introduce reforms: the logic is that when the country is stable the answer to that is "Why?" and when there is a crisis it is "Not now." This circular argument has meant that change only happens with external intervention or when the system breaks down totally, as we are witnessing today on the streets of Lebanon in an amazing show of popular rejection and demand for change.

The protests we are seeing in Lebanon are much like protests all over the world against establishments that no longer meet the expectations of their populations. Revolts in Chile, Ecuador, France's Gilets Jaunes, the UK's Brexit, the protests in Iraq, Algeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Hong Kong and Spain bear many similarities. Corruption, inefficiency,

clientelism and despotism do actually exist in countries where there is no 'sectarian' system and that comply with the norms of modernity. There is a global problem that exists even in 'secular' countries; blaming the system in Lebanon is a lazy way out and an excuse not to address the real issues.

What is needed is to channel the energy and creativity toward a serious re-examination of the roots of our problems as well as a proper evaluation of our political system going back to historical sources like the ideas of Al-Nahda in the 19th century and of Michel Chiha and his circle in the first half of the 20th century, as well as the debates around nationalism and the identity of the country in its formative period. What is needed is a new social contract between the state and its citizens.

The Turkish historian Engin Akarli describes the Lebanese power-sharing formula as a form of Lebanese civility, ensuring that every component of society has a seat at the table and a stake in the process. Such secure boundaries allow people to transcend sectarian identities, while in times of insecurity they cling to them even more. This kind of civility is deeply ingrained in our culture: a non-sectarian organization in Lebanon means a symbolic inclusion of representatives of all communities – it is a form of coexistence we should all be proud of.

Yes, sectarianism does exist, but it is not everywhere and it is often in the eye of the beholder.







Photography courtesy of [Elias Moubarak](#)



Dr. Bassel Salloukh is an associate professor of political science at LAU. His current research looks at post-conflict power-sharing arrangements, the challenge of re-assembling the political orders and societies of post-uprisings Arab states, and the geopolitics of the Middle East after the popular uprisings.

Would you characterize what's been happening as an uprising, a revolution or a movement of popular protests?

I call it a revolution because the way the sectarian system is organized institutionally and ideologically, and at the level of its political economy, is meant to incentivize sectarian identities and ensure that these types of anti-sectarian protests do not emerge from outside the system.

But because the political economy of sectarianism has collapsed, and in the process led to the drying up of the clientelist swamps, people rebelled. This is what we saw on October 17.

So, this is a revolution against a very robust and complicated sectarian system that is meant to create docile sectarian subjects. You have a nascent cross-sectarian, cross-regional, cross-class, anti-sectarian community positioning itself against an existing hybrid sectarian community. This is the real battle.

Do you view targeting state institutions and the judiciary as a positive development, an indication that the protesters are becoming more organized?

I think so. We are dealing with a new generation, the late millennials and Generation Z, that the political elite doesn't really understand, because it only knows clientelism, and works on the basis of "I give you state resources and state positions, and you give me loyalty." But that is not the kind of imagination that Generation Z operates on. I think they are learning very quickly, drawing on lessons from previous uprisings.

At the outset it was very important that they block roads to shock the system, and to show their serious intent by bringing the country to a standstill. Beyond that, what they needed to do – which is what they are doing now – is to focus on the nodes of corruption in the system.

Generation Z has a better understanding of the horizontal dispersion of power in the system, and the need to use the same strategy in fighting it. We are not in Mubarak's Egypt or Tunisia's Ben Ali where the head can leave or step down. Power in the sectarian system is very dispersed, so you have to penetrate it strategically and, as Italian Marxist thinker and activist Antonio Gramsci would say, engage it in a long 'war of position.'

Much more importantly, today's protests are neither limited to Beirut nor are they interested in some kind of representation in government. Rather, they want to keep the political elite off guard.

The most important struggle now is to get the judiciary to assume its responsibilities.

Is a leaderless and horizontal revolution a point of strength and if so, could it become be a point of weakness?

On the contrary, I think this generation has learned a lot from the 2015 protests. I attend a lot of these talks in Martyrs' Square, and you can see the generational difference between those old guard leftists who can only operate within an organized hierarchy and network, and this younger generation that simply refuses any kind of organization or leadership.

They have this very interesting strategy, where the thinking goes along the lines of "It is not my job to tell you [the government] to do one two three," but "You are in power, you do your job, and I will hold you accountable." This is a phenomenon that you see among this young generation globally.

But organization is inescapable, at least in preparing for the long-term battle against the sectarian system. How they will overcome this paradox will be a great challenge for this protest wave. But I think we are already seeing movement in the right direction, especially agreement on a set of clear, specific, and incremental objectives.

Granted that the grievances go much deeper than the WhatsApp tax, but didn't the government see this coming with all the discontent that was being voiced?

This again goes back to the sectarian system, whereby the political-economic elite assume that they can take people for granted, having divided them along sectarian 'streets' – a disgusting term, one that assumes people are not citizens with rights and responsibilities. People are mobilized simply as members of sects and not along socio-economic grievances. It is in fact the very nature of the sectarian system to assume that people cannot mobilize along gender or socio-economic, regional, or environmental issues. That is why the government thought it could push further in the 2020 budget. This tells you something about the inability of those in power to see that they are dealing with citizens with rights and with dignity.

The political economic elite thought that it could keep doing what it was doing, but the importance of the WhatsApp tax was that it added insult to socio-economic misery. We know from research that you can push people socio-economically, but at some point something will trigger a sense of insult. In Chile, it was a hike in the metro price. It is the symbolism behind it that matters.

As a political scientist, did you foresee a people's revolution?

If you go back to my op-ed "The Anatomy of Corruption in Postwar Lebanon," published in May 2019 by The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, you'll notice that the question I was trying to grapple with was what will happen when the

political economy of sectarianism reaches a dead end. What will happen when the clientelist swamps dry up? What's more interesting is that in my Intro to Political Science class, I often ask my students to write a three-page op-ed piece, and coincidentally on Thursday October 17, we agreed that the question would be "Why do people rebel in certain places, but not in others?" Of course, the question in the back of our minds was why wasn't there a revolution in Lebanon, why do you see it in Chile and in Algeria, but not in Lebanon?

This was a central question that people like myself were asking. We wanted to know where the protesters were, given the sharp income disparities and hard socio-economic conditions in the country.

The sectarian system in Lebanon, in your words is not "a house of cards and will not collapse overnight." Are you optimistic?

Yes, very much so. These late millennials and Generation Zs have destroyed the taboos and walls of fear that were created by the sectarian system, and they have demystified sectarian demonization in the process.

I am much more optimistic about the future implications of what's happening now than I was of other movements. They have already achieved many victories: they have declared the end of the civil war, on their terms; they have created a new imagined community beyond sectarianism; and they have reintegrated the peripheries into the country, Tripoli, Akkar and the South – places that were forgotten. They have demonstrated that there is a way of activism that is peaceful but that can really hurt the sectarian system.

Now, the challenge is to continue to put pressure on the system, and on those sites that generate accountability, but especially the judiciary. We have to help the judiciary, through popular pressure, to break free from the grip of the political economic elite.

So, you believe it has to start at the level of the institutions of different sectors.

Absolutely. And you keep the pressure and keep them on their guard as the protesters are doing. The 21st century is the century of counter revolutions. But the greatest achievement of this revolution so far is that they have changed the terms of the debate and the modes of mobilization. It is no longer about what the Sunnis, the Shia, the Christians or the Druze want; it is about who can stabilize the economy. Who can prevent monetary collapse? Who can manage the environmental crisis? Who can manage the pollution crisis?

The terms of the debate have completely changed. And that's what you need to build on, because that's how you destroy the hegemony of sectarianism in the long run.



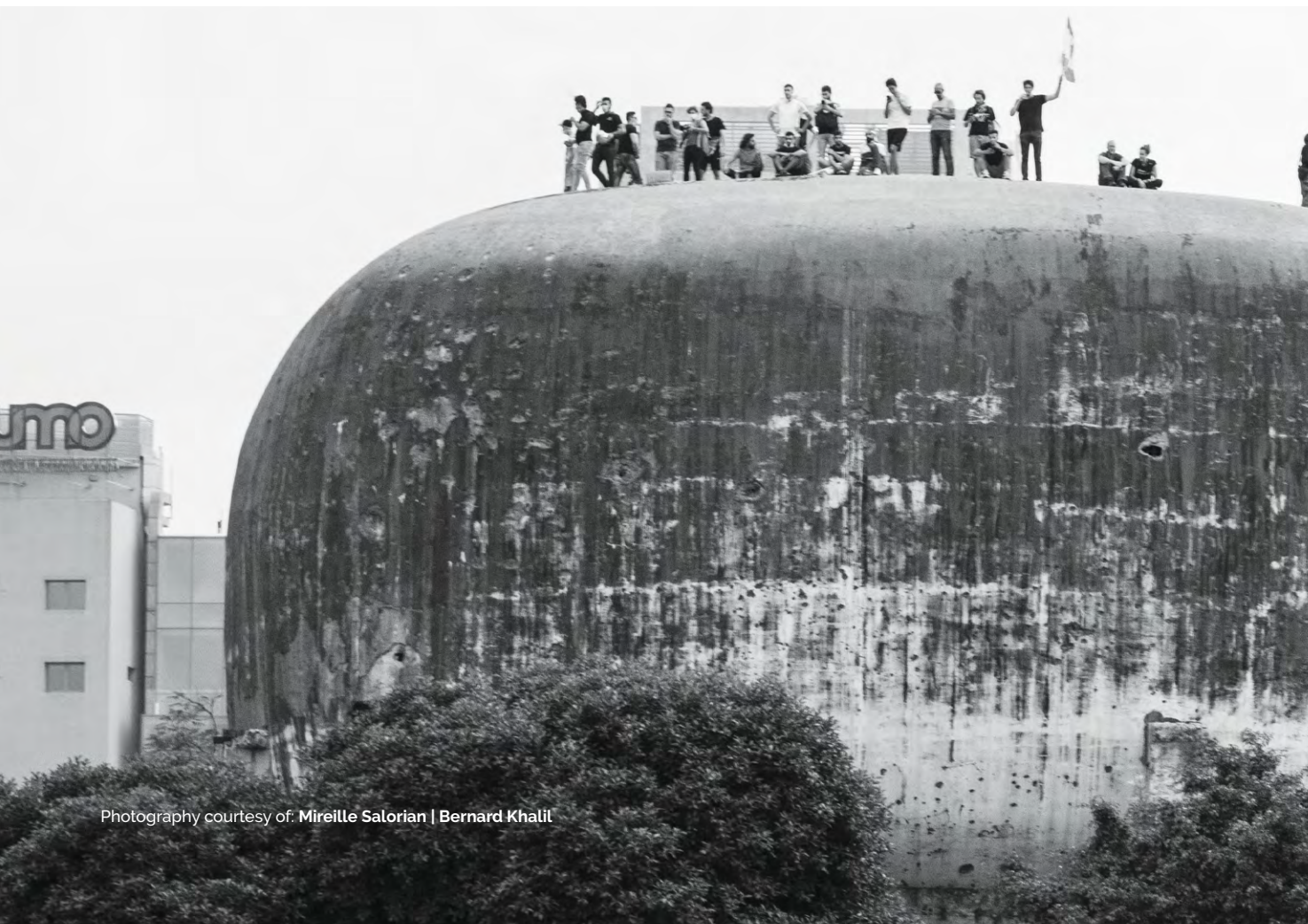
Dr. Claudia Kozman is
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multimedia journalism.

What lessons can be drawn from the uprising in the context of digital-era journalism?

Evidently, citizens played a big role in the dissemination of information in this revolution. This was expected due to the reach of the protests and traditional media's inability to be everywhere at all times. What happened in Lebanon falls in line with research about protests and other accidental events, such as natural disasters, that shows laypeople to be a major source of breaking news.

During these protests, public spaces and squares turned into makeshift newsbeats for journalists, but beyond them, media personnel are not equipped with the tools to predict who will say what, when and where. That's where citizens come in, capturing and sharing an 'unusual event,' broadly defined as any happening outside the norm.

Now that students have seen first-hand the role they can play as citizen journalists, I hope they will be able to exercise their skills in filtering news.



How can misinformation and propaganda be combatted?

There isn't one model that works for all situations. What is needed is basic media literacy skills and an awareness of how information could be easily misused, both intentionally and unintentionally.

A few simple tips could shield people, to a certain extent, from believing and sharing inaccurate information. To start with, the source of the message and the person who created it should be vetted. It is also important to check the webpage for factual info, whether the listed contact number works, whether there are grammar mistakes or too many advertisements and outside links.

A WhatsApp message with no source and no information about its origin should simply be dismissed. This is classical fake news.

Propaganda is easier to catch than fake news and misinformation, because it is directly related to the source of the message. When we know the political agenda of the media outlet – which, fortunately for us, Lebanese media are quite open about – we should be alert to the outlet's attempts to sway our opinion.

Protestors created new means to bypass media blackout through live streaming and citizen journalism. Do you think this is a legitimate alternative to more traditional media outlets?

With the digital tools at our disposal, anyone can create information and become a major player in one particular instance. Here, traditional media have the advantage because it's their job, whereas for most citizens, it's more about capturing news accidentally, as a one off. However, in the case of a collective effort such as a protest, the people do become an essential component of the news cycle. Because of their ability to disseminate their views, they can bypass traditional media that have throughout history always favored officials over laypersons.

Another advantage that traditional media have, and which regular citizens lack, is access to the elite who provide the analysis and explanations the public needs to make sense of a situation. So, whereas people play an essential role in relaying events in unexpected places, traditional media are adept at organizing and packaging them for easier consumption. And because of their established identities as professionals, they have a wide reach and possibly wider impact.

One final element that could elevate them to a power status is the digital divide. Not all citizens have access to, or the skills for, digital media. Many people, especially the older generation, still rely on television as their main source of information either due to habit or digital illiteracy.





Photography courtesy of: Bernard Khalil





Dr. Sami Baroudi is a professor of political science and associate chair of the department of Social Sciences at LAU.

The protestors have been calling for the abolition of the sectarian system. How would change from our current sectarian system come about – is it through institutions, and if so, which ones?

This sectarian system cannot be indefinitely perpetuated. It has been creating one crisis after another and impeding the construction of a collective Lebanese identity that transcends sectarian and clannish identities.

Change will not come from within the entrenched political elites. It must come from civil society: from academics, activists and students. Lebanon's young generation that has taken to the streets demonstrated a fantastic capacity of coming together and calling for transcending this obsolete sectarian system.

Existing political institutions are the right forums for change. A key first step is the introduction of a new electoral system that is not sectarian. Reforms in personal status laws, such as civil marriage, are also pivotal. Politics must be understood in a broad sense. All work that aims at changing/amending the laws of the state is political. Change will be very difficult, but this is the moment to launch such initiatives. If not now, then when.

Is secularism the only solution in Lebanon, considering the deeply entrenched confessional culture? If not, what alternative is there to ensure transparency and good governance?

We can separate between the fight for secularism and the fight for transparency and clean and good governance. However, in the long term, the viability of the Lebanese political system hinges on the gradual elimination of the sectarian system. It is a long uphill battle, but we must wage it.

An alternative would be establishing a senate where the various confessional groups are represented, while electing parliament on a non-sectarian basis is a good suggestion, as long as it does not add to the salaries of politicians and complicate the legislative process.

What's your vision for electoral reform?

A new electoral system preferably based on proportional representation in large districts. While people would vote for lists, it is a must that in sectarian-mixed districts these lists include candidates from diverse sectarian backgrounds, without any suffocating quotas. A new electoral system is a must.





Dr. Tamirace Fakhoury is an associate professor of political science and international affairs in the Department of Social Sciences, and the director of the Institute for Social Justice and Conflict Resolution (ISJCR) at LAU.

What makes the Lebanese revolution different from other movements, leaderless or grassroots?

This time, Lebanon's protest movement has cut across various social classes, and was able to provide a platform for manifold grievances that all communities share. The factors of the ailing economy and the disintegrating trust between the Lebanese people and their political leadership were a major catalyst in this movement. In 2018, elections took place, and people voted for their traditional leaders in the hope that they could enact reforms, only to see their hopes shattered. The missed political opportunity for reform and the fact that grievances have been building up for such a long time, leaving people with a sense of deep alienation, were key to this movement.

This is why I call upon analysts to explore how this movement resulted from important structural fallacies and 'systemic seisms' at the heart of Lebanon's post-war order.

Current events call for situating the anatomy of Lebanon's revolution within wider socio-economic and political structures that have remained obsolete and resistant to reform.

This protest movement also signals that the 1989 Taif Agreement and its aborted implementation have begun to show their limitations.

Did the emergence of organized grassroots movements over the past few years pave the way for the protests – and eventually, the revolution?

Protest movements and uprisings do not arise in a vacuum. They draw on a legacy of activism ingrained in societal structures. I definitely believe that existing organized grassroots movements have created an underlying current.

Yet the arising question is the following: Why is this protest movement different this time? In my opinion, it requires a deeper analysis of the structural and relational dynamics at the heart of Lebanon's economic and socio-political structures. Riveting attention on grassroots movements ignores the bigger picture. We are dealing with a huge disconnect between the political establishment and the citizenry, which is widening by the day. The political system has been immune to reforms, both legal and structural. In this context, what happens? Social contracts laid out by political systems implode.

Notwithstanding this, the presence of previously formed organized grassroots movements has definitely helped to give this movement a sense of direction such as the abolition of sectarianism, a call for early elections, and so on.



Dr. Walid Marrouch is an associate professor of economics and assistant dean of Graduate Studies and Research at LAU.

Can a single currency policy help the economy? Is pegging the currency to the dollar a wise move or should our country follow the example of foreign countries and impose its currency on citizens and perhaps the outside world?

Lebanon has been pegging the Lebanese Pound (LBP) to the US dollar (USD) at an average rate of 1,507.5 LBP per USD since 1997. During this long period of fixed exchange rate regime, the structure of the Lebanese economy became adapted to the peg, which came to be seen as a bedrock to financial stability. The Lebanese economy thus became a largely dollarized economy where both the LBP and USD are used interchangeably as currency.

For instance, in 2018, the dollarization rate of bank deposits exceeded 70 percent. However, the peg also promoted imports financed largely by remittances in foreign currencies from the Lebanese diaspora. This led to a structural trade deficit where imports exceed exports seven-fold, while our exports are not competitive on the international markets. As such, abandoning the peg abruptly would result in a severe reduction in the purchasing power of the Lebanese population, which will negatively affect living standards across the board.

Nevertheless, removing the peg in the long run would make the Lebanese economy more attractive to foreign investors seeking to produce in and export from Lebanon. This would also promote tourism, as the sector would become more affordable to regional and international visitors.



Photography courtesy of Elias Moubarak



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Considering the size of the Lebanese economy, is it possible to reach a point where we can offer enough jobs to significantly decrease the brain drain?

Of course it's possible. The cause behind the brain drain is not the "size of the economy" but its composition, which is skewed toward low productivity and informal sectors that do not generate enough good high-wage jobs commensurate with the level of skills and education among the youth. What is needed is the creation of a modern economy through the transfer of resources from the aforementioned sectors to higher productivity sectors that are export-oriented and dynamic. In this way, we close the existing gap between the supply of skilled labor coming out of universities and the deficient demand for such skills produced by the rentier economy. This "gap," which generates unemployment, underemployment and emigration among the youth, is the main reason why the young are joining the uprising today.

You mention the problem is in the composition of the economy. How is it actually composed, and what do you mean by "informal sectors?"

The World Bank in its MILES (macro, investment, education, labor and social protection policies) report on Lebanon in 2012 analyzed the trend of the Lebanese economy toward



generating low-productivity services jobs such as trade where 47.8 percent of the labor force works, while the high-productivity services such as finance absorb only 9.4 percent of the labor force. In the same vein, employment in manufacturing and agriculture is only 13.3 percent. This translates into low-wage jobs even for the skilled labor force such as university graduates.

The informal sector is the sector where either workers work for a wage but are not formalized through contracts, full-time employment and retirement clauses, or are low-skilled and self-employed. These form around one third of the labor force in Lebanon. Their work conditions are precarious and generate low incomes and low productivity. In sum, the Lebanese economy is not utilizing the technological and scientific potential available in the country, which is why it ranked last among 12 Arab countries in the World Economic Forum Competitiveness report of 2018.

What corrective steps need to be taken to transition to a “modern economy?”

The transition to a modern economy is not an easy task. Countries such as Russia, China and South Korea transformed their economies from backward economies to industrial economies following an arduous path of economic development that destroyed the traditional sectors or “exploited” them for the benefit of the advanced sectors. In Lebanon today, the “traditional sector” is the rentier

economy that diverts resources away from production and manufacturing. We need to impose taxes on sectors such as banking, real estate, and trade and transfer resources toward the productive sectors. This will necessitate a modern industrial policy by the state in targeting the sectors that would generate high value-added activities and high-wage jobs that are commensurate with the scientific capabilities of a modern labor force. This is the only way to achieve such a transformation. It will not happen in an automatic fashion or as a result of free market policies.

Do trade unions play any role in closing the unemployment gap?

Historically, the trade unions have played a role in collective bargaining agreements that increased wages and linked them to increases in productivity.

In the US, for example, the United Automobile Workers union and General Motors (UAW-GM) agreement in 1948 – which linked wages to productivity – was instrumental in creating the middle-class society that emerged after WWII. In Lebanon today, trade unions are weak and only 3 percent of the labor force belong to trade unions. Their role will be instrumental in devising such agreements as the economy moves to a more productive one, as they will ensure that the fruits of the increases in productivity do not only accrue to capital but also to labor, thus creating a fairer economy.



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