

The Lebanese should not give up their battle for rights

Believing they can wait out or suppress the uprising, faction leaders fatally underestimate citizens' awe-inspiring tenacity



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It is not easy to attend a protest rally. It takes guts to take to the streets week after week, enduring violence from Hezbollah thugs and pressure from the authorities. Then there are those patriotic Lebanese who repeatedly travel from Europe, the Gulf and even the US to participate in these demonstrations of national solidarity.

Like many emigre Lebanese, I date the departure from my homeland to Israel's 1982 invasion. The events of recent weeks have reawakened a connection with this love of our lives: A renewed pride and sense of belonging to the motherland, whose identity we feared was being lost forever.

I am in awe of the children turning out in huge numbers, giving emotional testimony about seeing their parents crushed day after day by financial hardship and economic uncertainty – the consequence of decades of mis-governance and naked theft of our nation's wealth.

Across the Western world throughout 2019, millions of children similarly poured onto the streets, putting us to shame by protesting the irreversible damage our generation has inflicted upon the environment.

Many enlightened Lebanese children would like to have taken a stand on climate change. They don't have this luxury because they must first liberate their coun-

try from this geriatric system of sectarian, kleptocratic cronyism.

These intrepid children shame their elders with their clear-sighted rejection of sectarian identities, embracing all Lebanese as fellow citizens. This is the spirit of the tolerant Lebanon I grew up in; blissfully ignorant of which friends were Christian, Sunni or Shiite.

Students are angry that, in order to get a job, they must sell their soul to a particular sectarian faction, which they must back in elections and display blind submission to. What reduced this most progressive of Arab nations to humiliating quasi-feudalism?

Protests in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and especially Lebanon have been defined by a leading role for courageous women and even the elderly – despite cowardly attempts to harass and intimidate them back into their homes.

Women have been the most forthright in saying: Let the banks fail, let the roads remain closed, let the petrol reserves run out. There must be no business as usual until the revolution has run its course.

In recent days, high turnouts by students, doctors, lawyers and other professionals have contributed momentum to the uprising. Famous singers entertained the masses with patriotic singalongs. Lebanon's vibrant culture affords this national awakening a refreshingly different atmosphere to uprisings elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Shiite clerics have, in their sermons, fearlessly delivered stinging rebukes against the ayatollahs of Tehran and sectarian militias, questioning why citizens protesting their hunger and misery should be confronted with



Lebanese demonstrators gather and picnic at Beirut's Zaitunay Bay during a protest

violence.

Lebanon has among the highest diaspora populations in the world: An estimated 15.4 million, compared with just six million remaining in the homeland. I see fathers whose eyes well with tears when their daughters talk excitedly of making a life for themselves overseas, where they can find jobs, freedom and dignified standards of living. Why does Lebanon deny its citizens these basic prerequisites for a good life?

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region's financial, commercial, cultural and intellectual capital. Young, educated Lebanese entrepreneurs profited, both from

Mass uprisings do not erupt wit

SAAD HUSSAIN

The maelstrom of factors leading to Iraq's uprising, now in its sixth week, have been brewing for a long time. Some go back years and have their roots in the calls for reform during the government of Haider Al Abadi, which were supported by some parliamentarians but, as often happens in the political arena in Iraq, as soon as the ruling parties sensed a lull in the rage of the masses calling for change, they simply ignored their demands. Then, the pro-reform movement was limited to Friday gatherings in Baghdad's Freedom Square, rather than the throngs of thousands that now fill the streets daily. The large majority of those crowds belonged to the Sadrist movement and were acting on the orders of the cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, who has spoken in support of this protest movement.

In the face of widespread criticism in 2015, Mr Al Abadi proposed far-reaching changes, including holding an inquiry into corruption and scrapping sectarian and party quotas in the appointment of top officials. Yet despite the gravity of the factors leading to the uprising four years ago, those promises made by ruling parties went unfulfilled.

The majority of the demonstrators today are young people, some of whom were born after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or who were children at the time. So far, the protest movement has not nominated leaders through whom to channel its demands, perhaps because of

the spontaneity with which the uprising began.

But their indignation is clear, prompted by the corruption that has plagued a succession of administrations since 2003. It has manifested in organisations that override state institutions and in a collective failure to try corrupt officials, regardless of their social background or their political, religious and sectarian affiliations.

Protesters have also been mobilised into action by state bureaucracy that prevents them from getting anything done; the failure to provide basic services such as electricity, drinking water, education and health care; and high unemployment, particularly among young people.

They are demanding the dissolution of parliament, the immediate holding of free and fair elections, supervised by the United Nations, and changes to the Electoral Commission, enabling them to select candidates independent of the existing political parties.

Their cry for reforms go further than ever before: they want a new constitution for the country that enshrines the separation of religion and politics, the formation of an independent judiciary council, the disbanding of all militias and the use of weapons to be confined to the state alone.

And they want to abolish all privileges enjoyed by the president, parliament and prime minister. Critically, they want to ensure Iraq is protected from Iranian interference in its national affairs.

So far, more than 260 people have been killed and thousands injured. There appear to be forces targeting the demonstrators with live ammunition as well as tear gas.

While the government has publicly renounced the killing of demonstrators, who are expressing their legitimate right to protest, there are suggestions that elements linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are behind the shootings.

That has not stopped demonstrators gradually increasing their demands. Initially they focused on job opportunities but that quickly swelled to calls for a change in governance. This was illustrated by the rejection of all figures of the regime, from officials to leaders of parties and militias as well as top officials. Prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi offered his resignation, which was accepted by president Barham Salih conditional on finding a replacement, but that has not been enough to quell public outrage.

Amid shifting allegiances, Mr Al Sadr's attempts to forge an alliance with Hadi Al Amiri, head of the Fateh bloc, to unseat Mr Abdul Mahdi resulted in him being expelled from demonstrations in Najaf last month. Even the country's most senior Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Al Al Sistani, has been ineffectual in establishing calm.

When Mr Abdul Mahdi first took up his post just over a year ago, there was hope of some of these endemic problems improving because he did not belong to a particular political party. He assumed power



Demonstrators gather during the ongoing anti-government protests in Baghdad.

as a result of the bloody uprising in Basra, which saw Mr Al Abadi ousted as prime minister. Mr Abdul Mahdi was chosen as a result of an understanding reached by Mr Al Sadr's Sairon bloc, the largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, and Mr Al Amiri's Fateh front. However, the major mistake made by Mr Abdul Mahdi was selecting his ministers on the basis of quotas, in the same way previous ministry appointments had been made. Mr Abdul Mahdi should have chosen his own ministers on the basis of competence and expertise. He should have rejected any request from the ruling parties in the quota system, even if this had led to his own removal by those parties. He would have gained the support and trust of the people as a result and might have had more

The important thing that has unfolded over the past few weeks is the peaceable and persistent call – even in the face of violence – for the separation of religion and the state, and protecting Iraqi citizenship and soil from sectarian, tribal and regional affiliations.

success in instigating reforms. Instead, the progress of his government has been very slow and it has fallen into the trap of once again

Unemployment is high, especially among the young who don't have access to basic services, their indignation prompted by the corruption of successive administrations