

Deposing a Democracy: Lebanon's 2019-20 *Thawra* in Comparative Perspective

Research Analytical Note

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Since mid-October Lebanon has been in open revolt. Fed up with decades of economic mismanagement, endemic corruption, and crippling sectarian polarization, Lebanese citizens of all classes and confessional backgrounds have risen up to demand a [wholesale change in their system of government](#).

Borrowing from the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, they have called for the “fall of the regime,” and then also added a demand of their own – “killun ya’ani killun,” “all means all.” In other words, they will not be satisfied with a token ministerial resignation or cabinet rotation; they want the resignation of Lebanon’s entire political class, whose members they claim have universally and consistently placed their own personal enrichment and self-preservation [over the welfare of Lebanese citizens](#).

And yet, despite months of protest and unrest, so far it appears as though such wholesale transformation is still some ways off. The protesters achieved their greatest victory thus far on October 29 when [Prime Minister Saad Hariri tendered his resignation](#) and dissolved the government. Yet Hariri’s replacement, Hassan Diab, an academic and former Minister of Education, does not represent the kind of radical break that protesters had envisioned. His new government, formed on January 21, [is dominated by the Shia party Hezbollah](#), certainly among the entrenched political forces that protesters want to dismantle. While the new government has done little to address the country’s acute economic spiral – [most Lebanese are facing severe restrictions on bank withdrawals](#), lending even more precarity to the current moment – the past week has seen multiple [violent attacks by state security forces against protesters](#), suggesting that the new government intends to approach the protest movement with repression rather than reconciliation.

Further questions loom just over the horizon. Diab’s government is a temporary, emergency government and eventually new elections will be called. But these elections will likely be run under the old, sectarian system, which the protesters have denounced. If and when these elections are held, Lebanon’s revolutionaries will face a choice: form a revolutionary electoral alliance that would try to defeat the old sectarian parties at the ballot box, or boycott the elections and continue mobilizing in the streets.

In part, the challenges facing the Lebanese revolution stem from the fact that it is seeking to topple a political system that has historically not bred many revolutionary movements: a democracy. Lebanon’s democracy is, of course, far from perfect, and maintains many illiberal features. But it does satisfy the minimum criteria that most political scientists agree sets democracies apart: regular rotation of government through competitive elections. These elections are supposed to provide an outlet for groups in society to air their

grievances and make their claims – which is why most democracies do not see social movements scale up to the level of full-fledged revolution.

For this reason, Lebanon's revolution is somewhat unique, even though it is occurring within the context of a [broader revolutionary wave](#), both globally and in the Arab World. The 2011 Arab Spring revolutions were, for example, mostly directly against republican authoritarian regimes and, to a lesser extent, monarchies. The ongoing revolutions in [Sudan](#) and [Algeria](#) have similarly taken on long-standing and well-entrenched dictators. Only in Iraq have revolutionaries confronted a regime that maintains most of the basic trappings of democracy – and, tellingly, [the Iraqi government's responses to these protests](#) have been just as muddled and ambivalent as in Lebanon.

So what do we know about revolutions in democratic contexts? What are the unique challenges that they tend to face and what kind of outcomes have they historically been able to achieve? Though Lebanon is undoubtedly unique, comparative analysis with other cases of revolutions in democracies may shed some light on where the Lebanese revolution is headed.

Revolutions in Democracies

Most revolutions have, historically, targeted non-democratic and illiberal governments. From [imperial Russia](#) to the [Shah's Iran](#) to the [Jasmine revolution](#) in Tunisia, historical archetypes of revolt have targeted states where elections are rigged or non-existent, where power is personified in the figure of a President-for-life, and where citizens enjoy few civil liberties or avenues for participation in the political process.

Yet the past 20 years has seen a rise in civic revolutions that target liberal(-ish) democracies. The twenty-first century has shown us that democracies can and do fail their citizens, politically, economically, and socially, particularly in cases like Lebanon where corruption is rampant and compromise is inhibited by institutionalized sectarianism. Lacking recourse despite nominal representation, citizens have turned progressively to the streets.

When citizens rise up against a democracy, the first question becomes, quite simply, what constitutes a victory. When power is not personified, reasonable revolutionaries can disagree over the degree of change that will satisfy their demands. Will the resignation of a cabinet or an executive leader suffice? A new election? A revised constitution? A commitment by the entire political class to stand down and exit politics? Indeed, one of the reasons the Arab Spring revolutions were able to successfully draw support from such diverse social forces is that they were able to rally behind a clear, unifying demand: the resignation of a single autocratic leader, whose rule encapsulated an entire political system.

In the absence of a singular target, revolutionaries may find it harder to reach consensus over means as well as goals. Typically, social movements in democracies end up [channeling street mobilization into electoral politics](#). Fielding political candidates or creating a set of lobbying organizations can be an effective way for issue-based movements

to accomplish policy goals. Labor movements, environmental movements, and civil rights movements have been well served by these strategies. Yet for self-consciously revolutionary movements, political participation can be a double-edged sword. Maximalist demands for political change are poorly served by engagement with existing institutions, but refusal to participate can frustrate intermediary goals and alienate fringe coalitions.

Revolutionaries in democracies may also expect different tactical responses on the part of political elites. Effective authoritarians have been known to respond to revolutionary movements with swift social or symbolic concessions, like a bump in subsidies. Autocrats often send [emissaries to negotiate or police to terrorize](#), or both.

But democracies – particularly weak ones, under siege – often lack the coordination or capacity to respond strategically to revolutionary movements. Elite divisions, power-sharing agreements, and constitutional checks on executive authority all make it less likely that governments will offer either concessions or a concerted, violent attack in the early stages of a revolution. To be sure, repression may still arrive, though usually later in the game, and often in the form of pseudo-state thugs allied with one political faction or another. Certainly, in the Lebanese revolution we have seen this dynamic play out, with protesters [coming under attack](#) from a variety of [vigilante groups and thugs](#) sponsored by various Lebanese political parties. These non-state forces can offer plausible deniability to whoever sent them, and their effect is often to spread fear and uncertainty, in addition to violence. Facing shadowy and unaccountable foes, revolutionary movements in democracies may ironically suffer even more from violent retribution than those in authoritarian states.

In Lebanon as elsewhere, these dynamics come together to reveal the central, multi-layered paradox of revolting against a democracy. Commentators are often quick to call out protest movements for disunity and disorganization. Yet in Lebanon, as in other cases, “the regime” has proven *more* incoherent than the revolutionary movement. Indeed, the irony is that these divided, conflict-ridden regimes with nominal mechanisms of accountability might prove hardest to depose with a popular movement.

What Happens when a Democrat is Deposed?

The difficulty of successfully overhauling a faction-prone and incoherent democratic regime like Lebanon’s is well borne out when we look to other cases of revolution in democracies. To be sure, forcing an elected incumbent to resign, as Lebanon’s protesters have done, is not particularly rare. In fact, Lebanon itself has seen revolutionary mobilization take down governments in the past. The best-known precedent is the 2005 [Cedar Revolution](#), which led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country and the resignation of the pro-Syrian government led by Omar Karami.

But perhaps an even better analogy is the lesser known [1952 Rosewater Revolution](#). Like the current wave of protests, this revolution was staged by a diverse multi-confessional coalition of movements and parties who opposed the corruption, sectarianism, and authoritarian tendencies of the government headed by President Beshara al-Khoury,

Lebanon's first post-independence president. Al-Khouri was forced to resign when his army commander-in-chief, General Fuad Shehab, refused an order to break a nationwide general strike. But his successor, Kamil Shamun, who had been closely aligned with the revolutionary forces, kept the old system largely intact, other than firing some crooked civil servants and passing several judicial reforms. And in the end his government turned out to be nearly as authoritarian and unaccountable as al-Khouri's.

More recent cases, drawn from other regions of the world, followed broadly similar trajectories. For example, in 2001 anti-government protests in the Philippines toppled the populist president Jose Estrada; the revolution was dubbed [EDSA 2](#), in reference to the first "EDSA" revolution in 1986, which [ended the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos](#) and rallied a similar coalition of social forces. The opposition figure Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was then elected president on a groundswell of revolutionary support, which she drew on to remain in power for nine years. But like Shamun in Lebanon, Macapagal-Arroyo pursued only token reforms, and ultimately her administration became just as corrupt as her predecessor's.

Revolution also [broke out in 2001 in Argentina](#). Following the [devastating financial crisis of the late 1990s](#) citizens turned on the incumbent president, Fernando de la Rúa, when he tried to limit the amount of cash that could be withdrawn from Argentinian banks. His resignation ushered into power the opposition Peronist party, which then governed Argentina for a decade and a half. In some sense this [period of Peronist hegemony](#) did realize the goals of the revolutionary movement: the economy was stabilized, foreign debt was restructured, and the government moved in a decidedly leftward direction. But, again, many more fundamental reforms were never undertaken, and the recovery was driven largely by a surge in global commodity prices rather than changes in economic policy.

There is a common thread that runs through these diverse cases. Most of these revolutions "succeeded" by bringing to power a new elected leader from the political opposition. This leader then leveraged his or her revolutionary legitimacy to pass major reforms in line with – but still falling short of – the revolution's full demands. Ultimately, then, wholesale change on the order of what Lebanon's revolution has called for appears to have relatively few precedents.

A New Precedent in Lebanon?

Lebanon may be on the verge of defining a new type of political revolution against democracy – one where an entire political class, defined by outmoded sectarian division and riddled with corruption, cedes power to a new generation galvanized by concerns over social justice. In another reading, these maximalist revolutionary demands may prove what is necessary to force existing elites (and perhaps some new ones) into a position of compromise over key issues that matter to protesters, like austerity and unemployment.

Escalating repression does not appear, as of yet, to have demobilized the protest movement. While the future of the movement remains uncertain, we can be sure that the replacement cabinet represents neither the goal nor the end of Lebanon's *thawra*.

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