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Prime Minister Hariri's resignation intensifies Lebanon's political crisis

Far from resolving the political and economic crisis engulfing Lebanon, the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his government—a key demand of the mass protest movement—has only served to exacerbate the instability.

Announcing his resignation, Hariri said ominously, “Today, to be honest with you, I have hit a dead end, and it is time for a big shock to confront the crisis.”

The mass demonstrations that started on October 18 were sparked by a proposal to levy a \$6-a-month tax on WhatsApp messages, aimed at making the deeply impoverished working class pay for Lebanon's deep economic crisis.

They soon morphed into a wider social protest against the high cost of living, social inequality, systemic corruption and the entire political establishment with slogans such as “We are one people united against the state. We want it to fall” and “All of them means all of them” and “Revolution, revolution!”

Even after Hariri abandoned the tax and forced his fractious coalition partners to agree a budget for 2020 that imposed no additional taxes on the working class, halved current and former politicians' salaries and benefits and required the central bank and private banks to contribute \$3.3 billion to a “near-zero deficit” budget, protestors would have none of it.

They demanded the resignation of the entire government and an end to the divisive sectarian system imposed upon them by the Taif Accords, brokered by Saudi Arabia, the US and Syria and only confirmed after the development of the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1990, that ended Lebanon's 15-year-long civil war. As a result, government posts

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are distributed to key political dynasties, war lords, billionaires and key members of the various sects that have enriched themselves at the expense of the working class.

For two weeks, economic life was at a standstill as schools, universities, banks and businesses remained closed. The banks reopened yesterday, after imposing strict limits on withdrawals and dollar purchases.

With a national debt of \$86 billion, and recently reduced to junk-bond status by the credit ratings agencies, Hariri's budget had sought to satisfy onerous economic and fiscal conditions for accessing the \$11 billion in loans pledged at last year's CEDRE conference in Paris. To no avail. The agencies have still refused to release the funds.

The head of Lebanon's central bank has warned that the government only has days to resolve the economic crisis.

While the overwhelmingly young and predominantly working-class protestors celebrated the government's fall, the essentially leaderless movement has no clear political perspective or program, articulating opposition to imperialism and all factions of the Lebanese bourgeoisie, to realize their objectives. This leaves them prey to more organized, external and bourgeois forces, particularly some of the Christian parties that have close links to the military. Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party, whose four ministers resigned from the government during the protests on October 19, has given his full support to the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Hariri remains the head of a caretaker government until President Michel Aoun secures parliament's support for a new prime minister, which under the constitution must be a Sunni politician. Aoun is widely expected to tap Hariri again for the job, or possibly someone from his own party, the Free Patriotic Movement, the largest single party in the parliament, although Hezbollah, with its Shia ally Amal, has by far the largest coalition bloc, having won the largest share of the popular vote.

But forming a government in Lebanon's fractured sectarian system is no easy task. It took Hariri nine months following the May 2018 elections to form a government, which has lasted less than a year. He has announced that he will not accept the premiership again without concessions from Hezbollah and the President's Free Patriotic Movement, led by Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil, as to the makeup of the government.

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The resignation is a major blow for Hezbollah, which along with its allies, emerged during the protests as Hariri's strongest backers, with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warning his supporters that any change in government would only worsen the situation, since it could take a long time to form a new government and solve the crisis. He also accused the United States and Israel of supporting the protests from behind the scenes. On several occasions, Hezbollah supporters using violence to clear roadblocks set up by protestors and attack those opposing the government.

However, no political event in Lebanon can be understood as a purely domestic issue, as Lebanon has long been a proxy battleground for influence in the region between the imperialist powers and rival regional states, with the broader regional conflicts between Saudi Arabia, the Gulf petro-states and Israel on the one hand, and Iran on the other, that have served to further destabilise the country.

In addition, the US-driven war for regime change in Syria, with whom Lebanon—once part of Syria until the post-World War I carve-up of the region by Britain and France—has historically had close family, social and economic relations, has had a major impact on Lebanon, leading 1.6 million Syrians to seek refuge in the tiny country.

The political vacuum in Lebanon poses the risk of an intervention by the regional powers or their local proxies.

While the major imperialist powers—the US, France and Britain—remained silent for days, they have nervously urged Lebanon to heed the protestors' "legitimate frustrations" and rein in corruption.

In the wake of Hariri's resignation, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has urged Lebanon's political leaders to act speedily to form a new government. According to a Reuters report, Washington is withholding \$105 million in military and security aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces, with no reason given.

Last week, President Donald Trump signed legislation imposing new sanctions against Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran and has played a key role in supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against the US-driven war for regime change, and expanding the list of those who can be sanctioned for doing business with Hezbollah. Trump described the sanctions as "starving" Hezbollah, saying "We will target, disrupt, and dismantle their operational and financing networks—of which they had plenty; they don't have plenty now."

It is clear that Washington is seeking to end Hariri's dependence on Hezbollah's support. In the wake of the Obama administration's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, the US and Iran had reached an understanding in Lebanon that brought former General Michel Aoun to the presidency in 2016—after two and a half years without a president—and Saad Hariri, who also holds Saudi citizenship, to the premiership with Hezbollah's backing. Under the deal, Hezbollah and its military wing would be free to support Assad in Syria and oppose Israel, while taking no formal role in Lebanon's internal political life.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, speaking at a military academy in Tehran on Wednesday, accused the US government and intelligence agencies "funded by reactionary regional countries" of being behind the crisis in Lebanon. While acknowledging that the Lebanese had "legitimate" grievances, he advised them to pursue their demands within "legal frameworks." His office warned that a "political vacuum" would not help the Lebanese and would only serve the interests of "enemies."

At the same time, there have been several recent incidents of Israeli reconnaissance drones flying into Lebanese airspace, some of which have been shot down, amid escalating tensions. Last August, Nasrallah vowed to retaliate "in every possible place along the border" for the two drones that crashed on one of its media centres in a southern suburb of Beirut that he has attributed to Israel.

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