

Clashes in Beirut as ruling elite exploits anger over blast

By Jean Shaoul
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Thousands of people poured into Martyrs' Square in Beirut Saturday, for the third successive day, to vent their anger over Tuesday's deadly port explosion.

They blamed the catastrophe on the plutocrats who have governed the country for decades, living in obscene luxury while workers face job losses, ever-deepening poverty, constant power outages and garbage piled up everywhere.

The explosion has killed at least 158 people and injured 6,000 more, with a further 100 people, mainly port workers, known to be missing. Around 300,000 people—12 percent of the city's population—have been made homeless. The blast blew up buildings, shattered windows and set neighbourhoods ablaze. Officials have estimated losses at \$10 billion to \$15 billion.

The catastrophic blaze—apparently the result of welding work on the door of the hangar storing 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate—could have been prevented. It was the result of the criminal neglect and callous indifference displayed by successive governments and the ruling elite. They ignored repeated warnings about the dangers for years, especially after a similar explosion in 2015 at the Chinese port of Tianjin that killed 173 people and injured hundreds.

The billionaires and millionaires that rule Lebanon allowed the powerful chemical, impounded in 2014, to be stored without proper safety controls close to residential neighbourhoods.

The blast has wrecked Lebanon's, Syria's and Jordan's main entry point for cargo, including the grain terminal and the silos that normally hold 85 percent of the country's cereals, threatening a food crisis for tens of millions of people.

The street demonstrations may appear to be a continuation of last October's anti-government protests against economic hardship, government corruption and the country's sectarian political set up. These protests had

subsided amid coronavirus pandemic restrictions. But the latest demonstrations were marked by the presence of the Christian and Sunni parties and ex-generals. Their leader is former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Washington's and Riyadh's man in Lebanon, who was forced to resign last year in the face of mass opposition.

The Lebanese national flag was prominent, as were signs extolling October's "Revolution." Some set up nooses on wooden frames as a warning to the country's rulers as the hashtag *#prepare the noose* took off. While some demonstrators called for a reckoning with all the plutocrats, others centred their fire exclusively on Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Islamist party. Its bloc is the largest in the country's parliament, reflecting the dominant numerical position of Shia, who constitute 40 percent of the Lebanese population. Protesters burned an effigy of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

In the evening, angry clashes broke out with the security forces which fired tear gas and rubber bullets to stop protesters breaking through the barrier to government buildings, wounding at least 238 people. A policeman died after a fall.

Nevertheless, one group of demonstrators, led according to *Al-Jazeera* by retired army officers, stormed the foreign ministry, declaring it the "headquarters of the revolution." Before being pushed out by the military, they pulled down the portrait of President Michel Aoun, who has supported Hezbollah's role in government, suggesting they have their sights set on installing a replacement who, under Lebanese law, must be a Christian.

Others entered the energy and economy ministries, as well as the Association of Lebanese Banks.

Unable to openly call for Hariri's return to power, these forces are urging the formation of an interim "salvation" government, "potentially headed by the military" and including bankers and other business figures, to "resolve

the humanitarian and economic crisis,” and prepare the way for elections on the basis of a new electoral law—in as much as three years’ time. Their aim is to restore the direct rule of the plutocracy, in the service of imperialism, and limit or eradicate the influence of the “mobsters” in Lebanon and Syria—a euphemism for Hezbollah.

Demonstrators pledged to continue the protests, even after Prime Minister Hassan Diab called for early elections to defuse the tensions. He was installed as a “technocrat” to head the government in January after Hariri’s forced resignation.

Diab said fresh elections in two months’ time were the only way out of the country’s crisis. His announcement followed the resignation of several Christian legislators who sought to precipitate an election and that of Information Minister Manal Abdel Samad. Diab has put 19 officials, mostly unnamed, under house arrest and/or banned them from travelling, accusing them of knowing about the ammonium nitrate. They include port and customs officials, judges, and former ministers. Several officials have had their bank accounts frozen.

Aoun has set up an investigation into the blast, which will also look at whether “external interference” was a factor, to report within four days. Commentators have seized on this to pin the blame on Hezbollah, claiming that the warehouse was a Hezbollah explosives dump that prompted an air strike by Israel.

While such suspicions of an Israeli attack are understandable, given Israel’s history of targeted assassinations, cyber-attacks and other assaults on its opponents, there is no evidence to back this up. In a recent border incident with Hezbollah near the disputed area of the Shebaa Farms, Israeli forces were under unprecedented orders to miss their assailants to prevent an escalation. That indicated that Tel Aviv does not want a renewed war with Hezbollah at this stage.

Nevertheless, theories of Hezbollah’s involvement serve a definite purpose—to deflect attention away from the political factions aligned with Washington, Paris and Riyadh, all of which have denied any responsibility for the explosion of a mountain of explosives kept at the port for six years.

Playing a key role in these machinations is the representative of the former colonial power, and suppressor of the year-long “yellow vest” protests, French President Emmanuel Macron. He became the first international figure to visit the country after the blast. Under the cover of offering aid, he is seeking to organise a political coup by the ruling elite against the working

class and engineer Hezbollah’s elimination as a political and military force in Lebanon and Syria.

Macron called for an international investigation into the explosion. His model is presumably the fraudulent \$700 million “trial” in absentia of four low-level Hezbollah members by a special UN-backed court in the Netherlands for planting the bomb that killed former Lebanese prime minister and billionaire Rafiq Hariri and 21 others in 2005. That court is due to report its findings soon.

Co-chairing a virtual international aid conference with the UN over the weekend, Macron insisted that aid was conditional upon “radical political reform.” While claiming he would “never interfere in Lebanese politics,” he said he could apply “pressure.”

Speaking on television on his return to Paris, Macron said that if France did not play its part, “other powers may interfere, whether it be Iran, Saudi Arabia or Turkey.”

In the absence of a revolutionary leadership advancing a perspective for unifying the working class, there are real dangers that the legitimate anger of workers, youth and middle-class layers engulfed by the ever-widening crisis will be channelled behind yet another bunch of kleptocrats, this time possibly headed by military generals.

The demands of Lebanese workers and youth, like those of workers who have risen in revolt across the region, in Europe, the US and elsewhere, have nothing in common with those of their political leaders. Their demands cannot be achieved other than through a unified struggle with their class brothers and sisters internationally for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism throughout the Middle East and around the world.

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