

In Lebanon, Nasrallah Loses Support

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In Lebanon, after the government in October announced plans to increase taxes on tobacco, alcohol, and WhatsApp calls, protesters took to the streets. In a country where the confessional divide has traditionally been of great consequence, members of all three major sects – the Christians, Shi'ites, and Sunnis – have joined the protests, a unity born of shared frustration and rage. Even after the government rescinded those tax increases, the protests continued, with ever-increasing numbers of protesters; they have become protests not against specific policies, but against the entire government, the corrupt political elite whom the protesters want to resign en masse. For Lebanon's economy is in a parlous state, while that elite – whose members play musical chairs with government offices – continue, in every economic weather, to line their pockets. The anger on the streets is understandable. The Lebanese

President, Michel Aoun, has amassed a fortune of \$90 million. His son-in-law, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, is now worth \$50 million, including \$22 million in real estate. The Prime Minister, Sa'ad Hariri, not to be outdone; he has a net worth of \$3.8 billion, much of it inherited from his late father, Rafik Hariri, who amassed his fortune of over \$10 billion through corruption. The Speaker of the House, Nabih Berri, a Shi'a ally of Hezbollah, has managed to accumulate \$78 million. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, though not a member of the government, has a net worth of \$250 million.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese economy is in free fall. The national debt of \$84 billion is 150% of its GDP; unemployment steadily rises, and for the young workers it is close to 25%; it is made worse for the native Lebanese by the presence of 1.5 million Syrian refugees, who are willing to take the most menial jobs. Many public services have deteriorated. Power cuts are frequent, for the energy infrastructure has not been updated, and this has disrupted the smooth functioning of factories. The cost of living has gone up. The protesters have made clear that they want the entire corrupt political class to resign; it is the endemic corruption and mismanagement by that class that has enraged the protesters.

To take just one example of Lebanon's state, there is the garbage problem. In much of Lebanon the landfills are full: the largest one, at Naamah, closed down in 2015. This past summer the landfill at Borj Hammoud, one of the two in Beirut, finally was full. Though it closed, toxic pollutants from this landfill continues to fill the air over Beirut. The government has failed to deal with the landfill problem. Instead, garbage is no longer picked up. And again there seems to be no plan by the government to deal with the disposal of garbage. The Lebanese have dealt with this problem by burning massive piles of trash in open fields, which again pollute the air, and also by bulldozing trash into the sea. Much of that trash pushed into the sea is then driven by currents back onto the land,

where it piles up on Lebanon's once-pristine beaches, that have become covered with waste of every conceivable kind.

During these protests that demand the resignation of the government, Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, has taken the side of the government. Though he has often presented himself as a defender of the poor in Lebanon, he has shown himself in this crisis to be concerned only with maintaining his political power. He does not want President Aoun, who though Christian has been Nasrallah's puppet, to be ousted from the government. He is happy, too, with the pliant Gebran Bassil as Foreign Minister. Even Sa'ad Hariri – whose father Rafik was assassinated by members of Hezbollah – has understood that Hezbollah is not to be opposed; for them, he's a tame Sunni who has learned the lesson of his father's death, and will not cause trouble.

So Nasrallah, instead of endorsing the protesters, told them to end their demonstrations. He warned of unnamed dark forces – Israel? Saudi Arabia? America? – that were supposedly behind the protests, in his attempt to delegitimize the whole movement. This merely inflamed the protesters, who began to include Nasrallah and Hezbollah in their chants of denunciation. Still worse, for Nasrallah, was his realization that many Shi'a, including members of Hezbollah who have begun to see him in a new and disturbing light, have joined the protests and not heeded Nasrallah's call to return home.

This is the first open challenge to his authority from fellow Shi'a that Nasrallah has experienced. He is now viewed – accurately – by many Shi'a not so much as a defender of the nation against Israel, but as one more politician lining his pockets, and completely unable to deal with Lebanon's economic degrading.

Even if the current government in Beirut manages to cling to power, Nasrallah has now lost support and prestige among his own Shi'a. He ought never to have come out, with such fury,

against the protests. He could have remained silent, thereby distancing himself from the current government, rather than endorsing it and even calling for it to remain in power. Or he might have issued another of his general remarks, to give the impression he was on the side of the protesters. He might have said something like this: "The Lebanese people deserve better from their government. It needs without further delay to solve the problems of unemployment, of the increase in the national debt, of a decline in public services, of the rise in the cost of living. Those who are capable of solving these problems should remain in, or be brought into, the government. Others should rethink their participation. Hezbollah will, as always, do everything it can to help all the citizens of the nation."

Such remarks will cost him nothing, because they mean nothing. They sound good, and cost him nothing. And that's enough. Meanwhile, no matter who is in the government, Hassan Nasrallah can continue, unperturbed, to enrich himself. For unlike Aoun, Bassil, Hariri, and Berri, he doesn't steal from Lebanon itself. Instead he takes a cut both from the financial aid sent to Hezbollah by Iran, and from the proceeds sent to Hezbollah by its members overseas who are involved in the drug trade – cocaine and heroin – produced in South America, and sold in Europe. So he can even declare himself against "government corruption" and, what's more, Hassan Nasrallah can mean it.

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