

# Events in Beirut expose public distrust of Lebanese authorities

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-26 21:32

BEIRUT: Two events in 24 hours in Beirut this week highlighted the troubled state of Lebanon. On Wednesday evening, members of the Internal Security Forces assaulted a lawyer who had violated lockdown rules, while on Thursday afternoon families of the victims of August's Beirut Port explosion took to the streets again to protest the judiciary's handling of the investigation into the disaster that left 202 people dead and around 6,500 wounded.

The lawyer Rachid Derbas, an activist and former minister, told Arab News: "These are signs of the state's rupture. We expected the judiciary and security to be the last systems to collapse in Lebanon, but they clearly weren't."

The families of the port explosion's victims demanded that those responsible for the explosion be "hanged in nooses." They proceeded to the house of Judge Fadi Sawan, who is in charge of the investigation but has yet to issue any reports explaining how the incident occurred, although he has asked parliament to investigate some ministers.

The protestors raised banners saying, "We will not remain silent anymore," and stating that they will not accept "a ruling of negligence or misadventure." They carried pictures of various prime ministers and other ministers who have held office since 2013, when ammonium nitrate is believed to first have been stored at the port.

They also demanded "bold decisions and the prosecution of all administrative, political and security officials, regardless of their status," adding that they believe the crime was not a result of negligence, but was "committed intentionally."

In a statement, the victims' families said: "A judge becomes an accomplice to a crime when he covers (for) the main perpetrators and manipulates the causes of the crime by ridiculing it and ruling it as negligence. We will not settle for the conviction of junior officials. Senior officials must be punished as well, regardless of their position in the state."

Derbas criticized Sawan for "resorting to parliament to request the prosecution of current and former ministers for failing to deal with the storage of thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate in the port."

While Derbas expressed his fear of politicizing the issue, he said he believes that the investigation requires "a large workshop of experts and specialized cadres, for one person cannot do this job on their own."

Meanwhile, the arrest of lawyer Afram Al-Halabi on Wednesday – for violating

the odd and even license plate ruling which allows people to drive on alternate days, depending on their license plate number – sparked anger from some, including the Beirut Bar Association, which condemned the violence of the security forces who made the arrest. Al-Halabi was reportedly thrown to the ground and knelt on before being handcuffed and taken to a police station.

Secretary-General of the Beirut Bar Association Saadeddine Al-Khatib, told Arab News: “We filed a criminal complaint in the name of the bar and the lawyer Al-Halabi, because the violence inflicted on him could have led to his death. He did not utter a word during his exposure to unjustified violence. Lawyers have the right to work during lockdown, for military courts are still operating, which requires the presence of lawyers to file complaints or secure releases. This violence is unacceptable, whether inflicted on lawyers or any ordinary citizen. As unionists, we took a stand. We will not communicate with the Interior Ministry. We have adopted legal procedures instead.”

“Whoever is leading the ship in this country is not concerned with human lives or saving people. He is only interested in himself and is subject to foreign policies,” Derbas told Arab News. “When choosing between bad and worse, he chooses the worst.

“This country is not a place to protect foreign interests. It is not a barracks or a platform. Hezbollah cannot keep the country hostage to Iran’s strategy,” he continued. “If a lawyer becomes subject to the mood of the military and the judge, then this system that is leading our country’s ship is not worthy of even riding a bike.”



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## [Turkey hits record COVID-19 cases after change in reporting](#)

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Thu, 2020-11-26 21:38

ANKARA: Turkey became the country with the third highest number of daily new COVID-19 cases globally on Nov. 25 – behind the US and India – after changing the way it reports figures.

Turkish Health Ministry has begun publishing all positive cases, including asymptomatic ones, in its daily count following months-long harsh criticisms from the scientific world, including the World Health Organization, and

opposition figures claiming that the measuring method used was hiding the true scale of the outbreak.

Up till Wednesday – since March – Turkey’s asymptomatic cases were not included in the number of daily reported cases.

The country recorded 28,351 new COVID-19 cases in the past 24 hours, including 6,814 with symptoms; 168 people had died on Nov. 25 due to COVID-19, raising the death toll to 12,840.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca has warned that the country may need to take “radical measures” as the number of daily COVID-19 deaths has climbed to record levels.

However, Caghan Kizil, a specialist in neuroscience and genetics at Dresden University’s Faculty of Medicine, tweeted: “We have reminded you of your responsibility for months. You did not take it into account. You created this situation by yourself. Being together would be by listening to scientists. Building trust was most important. You failed it, Mr. Koca.”

The government only introduced partial curfews for weekends, and limitations on restaurants and cafes.

However, these measures remain disputed by medical groups and local governors.

Istanbul metropolitan mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, has criticized government efforts that did not curb the pandemic. On the discrepancy in the Ministry of Health’s daily COVID-19 data, he recently announced that “even only in Istanbul the daily death toll is 50-60 higher than the announced national number.”

The officially announced death rates are also controversial, as the ministry announced 168 COVID-linked deaths on Wednesday, while the Istanbul municipality’s cemeteries department recorded 203 deaths alone on the same day due to “infectious diseases.”

The occupancy rates in the intensive care units of hospitals in the three biggest cities of Turkey exceed 70 percent. The number was by far the highest reported by the Turkish government since the beginning of the outbreak.

The Turkish Health Minister announced that about 80 percent of people who tested positive were either asymptomatic or showed slight symptoms – highlighting the importance of including asymptomatic cases in the total tally.

The Turkish Medical Association, the largest doctors’ group in the country, estimated that the average daily number of non-hospitalized cases was above 47,000. Many provinces in the country are also facing a third peak.

Meanwhile, due to the sharp decline in tourism figures, Turkey’s flagship air carrier Turkish Airlines needs \$2.5 billion of bank loans and is seeking state assistance, Bloomberg reported on Thursday. Over the first nine months of 2020, the airline recorded a 5.2 billion Turkish lira (\$0.66 billion) loss.



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## [End the political deadlock, support group tells Beirut](#)

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Wed, 2020-11-25 23:15

BEIRUT: The International Support Group for Lebanon (ISG) has voiced its dismay over delays in the formation of a government in the crisis-racked country and called on Lebanese authorities to implement urgent reforms. In a statement on Wednesday directed at Lebanon's leaders, the group warned

that as the political stalemate in the country drags on, "the social and economic crisis is getting worse."

The ISG called on Hassan Diab's caretaker government to "fully implement its immediate responsibilities," adding that the "overriding need is for Lebanon's political leaders to agree to form a government with the capacity and will to implement necessary reforms without further delay."

Pragmatic legislative steps are needed to alleviate the "economic stress faced by Lebanese families and businesses," it said.

The ISG was launched in 2013, and includes the UN, along with China, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Britain and the US, the EU and the Arab League.

In its statement, the group welcomed France's plan to hold an international conference in support of the Lebanese people by the early December. The forum will be co-chaired by the UN.

However, the summit "did not detract from the urgent need for government formation and reforms," it said.

On Wednesday, Reuters quoted "an official source" who claimed that Lebanon's central bank is considering reducing the level of mandatory foreign exchange reserves in order to continue supporting basic imports next year, with the already low reserves dwindling.

According to the source, Riad Salameh, the central bank governor, met with ministers in the caretaker government on Tuesday to discuss cutting the mandatory reserve ratio from 15 percent to 12 percent or even 10 percent. Foreign exchange reserves are currently about \$17.9 billion, leaving only \$800 million to support imports of fuel, wheat and medicine until the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Lebanese political leaders are seeking to shift blame for the parliamentary deadlock in a dispute illustrated by the exchange of accusatory letters between Nabih Berri's parliamentary bloc and President Michel Aoun. Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, tweeted on Wednesday: "We are in a vicious circle under the slogan of conditions, counter-conditions, names and counter-names, electoral and presidential bids, and flimsy regional bets, amid a tremendous change in the region."

At a meeting of the joint parliamentary committees on Wednesday to discuss a draft law for the parliamentary elections, representatives of the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces party voiced their objections, claiming the project presented by the Berri parliamentary bloc "fuels the political, sectarian and doctrinal divide because it is based on the idea that Lebanon is one electoral constituency."

Lebanese Forces MP George Adwan said that "what is being discussed today is a change in the political system, not just an electoral law."

The Lebanese Parliament is due to hold a plenary session on Friday to discuss a letter sent by Aoun "to enable the state to conduct a forensic accounting audit of the Bank of Lebanon's accounts."

Alvarez & Marsal, which was carrying out a forensic audit of the central bank's accounts, said last week it was halting the investigation because it was not being given the information needed to carry out the task.

The company's decision came after the central bank invoked a banking secrecy law to prevent disclosure of information.

Aoun had insisted on the forensic audit "so that Lebanon is not seen as a rogue or failed state in the eyes of the international community."

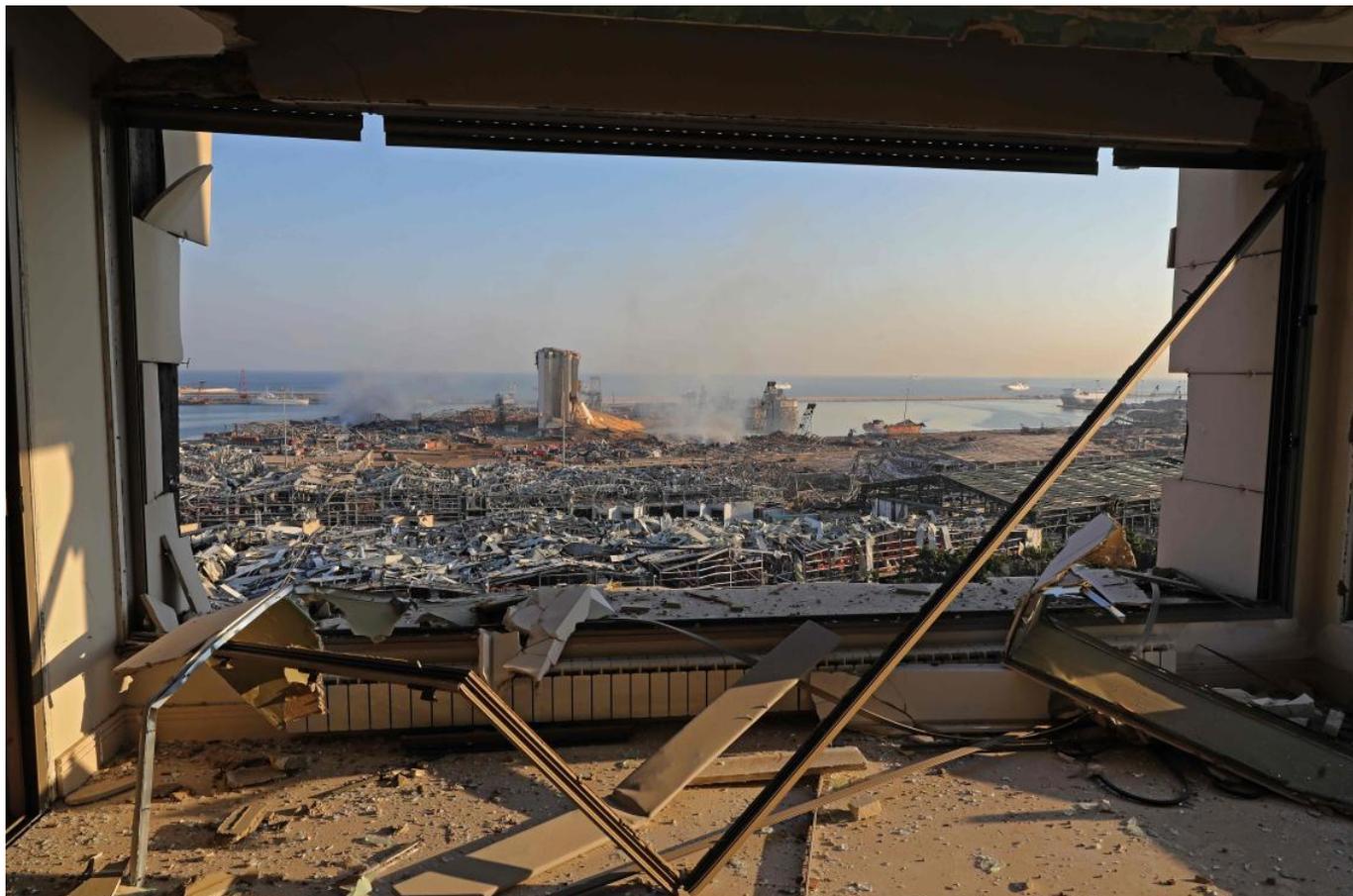
Families of the victims of the Aug. 4 Beirut port explosion staging a sit-in

near the parliament building demanded “a decree equating our martyrs with the martyrs of the army.”

Bereaved mothers, some carrying pictures of children killed in the blast, accused former and current heads of state of being responsible for the explosion.

Mohammed Choucair, head of the Lebanese Economic Organizations, said that Lebanese authorities “are dealing with this devastating event as if it were a normal accident.”

He said that “the only way to save Lebanon and rebuild Beirut is to form a capable and productive government that responds to the aspirations of the citizens.”



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# Political cracks in Turkish govt. deepen in nationalist's favor

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-25 22:46

ANKARA: Senior Turkish officials close to the presidency have criticized decisions by the ruling AKP party amid the growing power of two breakaway parties, DEVA and Future.

On Tuesday, Bulent Arinc, Presidential High Advisory Board member and former deputy prime minister, resigned following a dispute with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan over recent remarks in which Arinc criticized the imprisonment of Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas and prominent businessperson and dissident civil society figure Osman Kavala.

"Turkey's judiciary, economy and other areas evidently need reforms. There is a need for our country to relax and to find a solution to our nation's troubles. I decided that it would be more appropriate for me to leave my position as a member of the High Advisory Board," he said on Twitter.

The move followed the resignation of Berat Albayrak, the finance minister and son-in-law of Erdogan, this time with a bombshell Instagram post on Sunday night.

In a televised interview on Nov. 20, just days after Erdogan pledged a new reform wave for Turkey's judiciary, Arinc defended the releases of Kavala and Demirtas. His suggestion was harshly criticized by Erdogan, whose remarks "offended" Arinc.

Demirtas, former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, was jailed in November 2016 over allegations of supporting terrorism. He faces up to 142 years in jail despite an immediate release plea by the European Court of Human Rights.

Saying that the "arrest should not be turned into a punishment," Arinc also urged people to read Demirtas' storybook "Devran," authored in jail "to understand the Kurds and their suffering."

Kavala has been imprisoned since 2017 although he was never convicted of a crime.

"Arinc will go down as another big name within the AKP being pushed aside by a more irrational guard within the party that is more interested in rousing its small but vocal army of trolls, than it is listening to criticism within the party," Louis Fishman, a Turkey expert from Brooklyn College, told Arab News.

"For Erdogan, this move could undermine his call for judicial reforms, motivated by his wish to fix the state's image abroad," he added.

However, there are several rumors about cracks within the People's Alliance, formed between the AKP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), although MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli dismissed them on Tuesday.

"Cowards, plotters and swindlers are targeting the People's Alliance," he said. The latest remarks by Arınc, an AKP co-founder, are said to have angered Bahçeli, who flexed his muscles following the comments and pushed his ouster.

The recent operation against 101 Kurdish lawyers and activists in the southeastern province of Diyarbakir were reportedly conducted to please the alliance with the nationalistic party.

Fishman said that Arınc's resignation will have sent a strong message to Europe and the incoming Biden administration in the US that Turkey is "not really ready" to take serious steps in judicial reform.

"The AKP is now stuck between a rock and a hard place. It's hard to imagine that reforms can actually strengthen its weakening status, and thus it runs the risk of losing its MHP support. However, without the reforms, it also faces continued strife within the international realm. We will need to wait and see what path it takes in the near future," he said.

Berk Esen, a political scientist from Sabanci University in Istanbul, said the ruling alliance has been hit hard by the economic crisis that recently worsened following the COVID-19 outbreak in Turkey.

"The super-presidential system, which was introduced in 2018, has only worsened Turkey's governance record in domestic politics and the international arena. Faced with economic troubles, the government does not have sufficient resources to address growing popular unrest, especially in major urban centers," he told Arab News.

Esen said that Joe Biden's recent election win added to Erdogan's fear that his government could soon come under growing international pressure.

"Therefore, he may have been compelled to take some cosmetic measures to appease Turkey's former allies by taking half steps, such as releasing Kavala and Demirtas. This turn away from the party's nationalist course was also arguably supported by former AKP heavyweights like Arınc," he said.

But the honeymoon didn't continue for too long due to backlash coming from the MHP.

In his speech to the parliamentary group on Wednesday, Erdogan said that "the ruling AK Party's coalition with the ultranationalist MHP was drawn with blood during the July 15 coup attempt against the putschists."

Refuting the criticism voiced by Arınc and extending an olive branch to nationalistic sensitivities, Erdogan also said "there is no longer a Kurdish question in Turkey" and "Demirtas is a terrorist whose hands are covered by blood."

Erdogan also called on the judiciary to act against those who asked for the releases of Demirtas and Kavala, because the demands “violate the constitution’s article 138, which bans issuing orders to the courts.”

According to Esen, the political crisis has weakened Erdogan’s hold on power.

“It increased his dependence on MHP leader Bahceli, who remains a key actor in the ruling coalition and provides Erdogan with nationalist ammunition to deal with opponents,” he added.



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## [Houthis give green light for UN team to access decaying oil tanker](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-25 22:34

AL-MUKALLA: The Iran-backed Houthis had finally given the green light for an international inspection team to board the decaying FS0 Safer oil tanker moored off Yemen's Red Sea coast, the UN said on Tuesday.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the Houthis on Saturday sent an official letter to the UN confirming their approval for experts to access the stranded vessel to carry out vital maintenance checks.

The 45-year-old ship has been anchored about 60 km north of Hodeidah since the start of Yemen's civil war five years ago and is loaded with more than 1 million barrels of crude oil. Officials have warned that the rotting tanker posed "grave risks" to the environment and maritime navigation if left unattended any longer.

Although it appeared that the Houthis had at last bowed to local and international pressure, some Yemeni experts and officials remained skeptical as to whether the group would deliver on the promise.

"The objective of the UN-led expert mission is to assess the vessel and undertake initial light maintenance as well as to formulate recommendations on what further action is required to neutralize the risk of an oil spill," Dujarric added.

During a press briefing in New York, he said that the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) would handle picking members of the mission and equipment required for assessing and repairing damage to the Safer.

"I think if everything comes together, we would expect the mission staff and the equipment to arrive on site by late January or early February."

The tanker has been gradually decaying due to lack of regular maintenance since the Houthis seized control of the province of Hodeidah.

The UN, diplomats, and environmentalists have been pressuring the Houthis to allow international experts to repair the ship following reports that rust has eroded the tanker's structures, allowing water to enter into its rooms.

Local and international experts have warned that an oil spill would cause a major environmental disaster in the Red Sea that would destroy marine life and disrupt international commercial shipping.

In July, the Houthis agreed to grant the UN access to the tanker before changing their mind, requiring that the team included experts from countries that did not back Saudi-led military operations in Yemen.

Dujarric said that the approval from the Houthis in July was like a "broad statement. It was ... if I recall correctly, it had been a broad permission ... broad statement of saying, yes, you can come and do what you need to do on the tanker, but we need to figure out the technical modalities.

This time, he added, the Houthis were more serious. "This is a further step in the right direction."

Western diplomats who have long marshaled pressure on the Houthi group to allow the maintenance of the tanker expressed their optimism with the step, hoping it would help to avert a potential environmental catastrophe.

“The agreement to allow access to the Safer tanker is welcome (and overdue). Making it safe as soon as possible will prevent a potentially huge environmental disaster,” the British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron said on Twitter on Wednesday.

But Yemeni political analysts and activists have treated the positive media reports with skepticism, citing the rebels’ long track record of unfulfilled promises.

“There is no deal. The Houthis are playing you and us like a table tennis. The difference is that we know they’re playing us, while you’re still in denial,” Baraa Shiban, a Yemeni activist, said on Twitter on Wednesday.

In a tweet on Wednesday, Nadwa Al-Dawsari, a Yemeni conflict analyst, said: “I will believe it when I see it. Houthis are just trying to buy time to come up with a more convincing lie. It works every time with an international community that base decisions on wishful thinking, not reality. Thanks to the Stockholm agreement, they hold Safer a hostage.”

Meanwhile, Yemen’s Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Mohammed Ali Al-Maqdashi said on Tuesday that dozens of rebel forces, including several field commanders, had been killed in intense fighting outside the central city of Marib and in contested locations in the northern province of Jouf during the last couple of days.

During his visit to flashpoints in Marib on Tuesday, Al-Maqdashi vowed to defeat the Houthis and push them out of areas under their control.

“The Yemeni people and their armed forces are determined to win the battle to end the (Houthi) coup and rebellion and restore state institutions,” official media reported him as saying.



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