

Lebanon's revolution: A many-splendored thing

Mon, 2019-11-25 00:24

BEIRUT: As Lebanon's anti-government uprising enters its second month with no sign of losing momentum, downtown Beirut continues to wear a colorful, almost festive look.

The trappings of "Thawra" – revolution in Arabic – are hard to miss amid the chants against sectarianism and corruption: Tents, food stalls, flags of all sizes, walls covered with artwork, recycling areas and patriotic songs blaring from loudspeakers.

What began as a movement for political and economic change has morphed into something much larger. No matter how one chooses to describe the phenomenon, it has undoubtedly generated a degree of harmony, cohesion, solidarity and love among Lebanese people that was unthinkable just a few months ago.

Week after stressful week, people across the country – men and women, young and old, Lebanese citizens and expatriates – have shown endurance, discipline and restraint in the face of violence and provocation.



Green initiatives. (AFP)

To many Lebanese, this has been at once the best of times and the worst of times, with tributes paid to a martyr of the “revolution” in cities across the country, the emergence of Melheme Khalaf as a glimmer of hope after he

won the presidency of the Lebanese Bar Association on merit, and the president advising citizens dissatisfied with the country's political leaders to emigrate.

Other initiatives have also sprung up – yoga and meditation, daily clean-ups by volunteers, speakers' corners, and couches and board games.

Supporters of Lebanon's free-form revolution are signaling their resolve to both make their country a better place and look after each other's well-being.

Muwatin Lebne (Lebanese Citizen), an initiative promoting regular morning clean-ups in downtown Beirut, has worked wonders for the image of the capital's commercial hub.

Activists said that thanks to the efforts of 5,000 volunteers in the revolution's first 10 days, 10.3 tons of waste was sorted, the number of trucks carrying waste to landfills fell by 90 percent, half a million cigarette butts were collected to be turned into paddleboards, and 2,500 pieces of winter clothing amassed and dispatched to NGOs.



Waste collection and recycling. (AFP)

“As Lebanese citizens, it is our civic duty to keep our streets clean and sort our garbage for the interest and well-being of our country,” said Timmy Jreissati, a member of Muwatin Lebne.

“With the revolution, the idea of building awareness about the importance of this issue took hold. The initiative was meant to show the true civilized image of the Lebanese people.”

On Nov. 3, volunteers cleaned the dirt-stained and graffiti-filled exterior walls of both the Mar Geryes church and the Mohammad Al-Amin mosque. “As part of our initiative, we want to restore and preserve our country’s beautiful sites and monuments,” Jreissati said.

“Muwatin Lebnene is a spontaneous collective action of individual Lebanese citizens that was driven by civic duty and social responsibility. The initiative acts upon the needs of the country and its citizens in all civic matters and issues. To make our country better, we want to raise awareness about all civic duties, and educate and help people when needed.”

Protesters won their first battle when Saad Hariri resigned as prime minister on Oct. 29, but their stated mission – an end to corruption and an overhaul of the political system – will not be accomplished until all politicians resign and make way for a new government of technocrats.

Given the political elite’s reluctance to meet their demands and the uphill battle that lies ahead, the Lebanese who have been taking part in the protests need activities that can keep them motivated and in high spirits.

Ana Larriu, a Spanish meditation teacher who used to teach mindfulness to executives in Beirut, has been offering meditation sessions to people protesting on the streets since last month.

“I was just so frustrated that I couldn’t do anything, so I said to myself that I have to go, sit there and show that there is a different energy happening,” she told Arab News.



An inspiration message for protesters. (AFP)

The effect of the meditation sessions is deeply felt, according to Larriu, who is married to a Lebanese national. Some participants found themselves weeping, regaining strength and, finally, expressing gratitude for an experience they found hard to describe in words.

“The exercise allowed a lot of things to happen, so people could express whatever they needed to without having to label them,” she said. “It’s a place of freedom. It was amazing when, in the first week after the clean-ups, mothers would come here with children and we would do active meditation for them.

“For me, the most amazing thing is to find out that a lot of people meditate in their own way.

“We need to be focused. The revolution’s energy can sometimes be very volatile and just up in the air, so we need to combine both energies – we need to be ready to fight and, at the same time, we need to be completely grounded.”

Larriu said that meditation can also make it easier for the protesters to develop compassion, both self-compassion and compassion for others. Accordingly, all the exercises she teaches involve transmitting “love to the south and north of the country.”



A street artist paints a protest graffiti in support of Lebanon’s “revolution”. (AFP)

From her daily lessons on Samir Kassir Square, Larriu expanded to cater for protesters who sleep in tents in Martyrs' Square.

"They came over and wanted to take part," she said. "I realize that those in tents asleep at 8 a.m. are really tired. So we do active release exercises, which are designed to them feel great. It takes a lot of body work, more than just meditation, to release and recharge."

Larriu said that she will continue her practice for "as long as the revolution goes on" – and as long as it is needed.

Further north in Tripoli, the long-forgotten and deserted Ghandour building was reborn as a new landmark of the "revolution" when it served as a canvas for graffiti artist Mohamed Abrashh in his rendering of the Lebanese flag as "Tripoli, City of Peace."

As massive crowds continue to gather every night with patriotic chants and celebrations of their achievements, conversations are taking place in the afternoons in Nour Square, in Tripoli, in order to come up with novel strategies for maintaining political pressure.



A protest artwork on a wall in Beirut cheers up participants of the ongoing "revolution". (AFP)

Beirut's public gardens and squares have witnessed similar discussions on topics as varied as legal mechanisms to fight corruption and recovering stolen public funds, psychological resilience in times of social change, political power and the constitutional tools needed to achieve the revolution's goals, the country's economy's direction, countering violence, and a feminists' march that took place on Nov. 3.

Early on in the uprising, as one group of citizens moved their couches, fridges, carpets, mattresses and board games to the middle of highways, turning the streets into the "House of the People," other groups drew up a plan to form Lebanon's longest human chain on Oct. 26 as a symbol of national unity.

“It is only when we wake up to our oneness that peace shall prevail,” said Cyril Bassil, one of the human-chain organizers.

“We hope that the human chain will always symbolize the moment the Lebanese people woke up and chose to hold hands to build a non-sectarian country and reinvent Lebanon by freeing themselves from fragmentation.”

Around 200,000 people held hands along the 171 km stretch of the coastal highway from Tyre in the south to Tripoli in the north, with towns such as Halba, in Akkar, Hasbaya and Baalbek participating.

“It was surreal,” Bassil said. “It is thanks to the Lebanese who made the human chain happen. All pacifist activities are necessary because we need to change our language and we need to learn to express ourselves from a place of love, not fear – the Lebanese proved, on that day, that the civil war was truly over.”



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Students burn history books as protests continue in Lebanon
Lebanon protesters block MPs as street battles erupt

Revolutionary Guards threaten to punish protesters for Iran unrest

Mon, 2019-11-25 00:49

GENEVA: A senior commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards has urged the country's judiciary to mete out harsh sentences to what he described as "mercenaries" involved in protests against a fuel price hike last week, the judiciary's Mizan news site reported.

"We caught all the mercenaries who openly confessed they were doing mercenary work for America and ... the judicial system of the country will give them maximum punishments," Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, a deputy Guards commander, was quoted as saying.

Iran has blamed the US and Israel for stirring up unrest which has led to some of the worst violence in a decade.

Fadavi said several people were killed after being shot at from behind with a handgun from a close distance during the protests, which he said indicated the shooters were among the crowds.

Rights group Amnesty International said in a release earlier this week that security forces shot into crowds of protesters from rooftops and, in one case, from a helicopter.

Amnesty said at least 115 people have died in the unrest. Iran has rejected death toll figures as "speculative."

Iranian authorities have said about 1,000 demonstrators have been arrested.

The Center for Human Rights in Iran, a New York-based advocacy group, said on its website that a tally based on official figures and credible reports suggested that "a minimum of 2,755 people have been arrested with the actual minimum number likely being closer to 4,000."

Protests began on Nov. 15 in several towns after the government announced gasoline price hikes of at least 50 percent. They spread to 100 cities and towns and quickly turned political with protesters demanding top officials step down.



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Revolutionary Guards commander denies Iranian targets hit in Syria air strikes
Two Iran Revolutionary Guards killed in clash with militants

[As internet restored, online Iran protest videos show chaos](#)

Sun, 2019-11-24 21:45

DUBAI: Machine gun fire answers rock-throwing protesters. Motorcycle-riding Revolutionary Guard volunteers chase after demonstrators. Plainclothes security forces grab, beat and drag a man off the street to an uncertain fate.

As Iran restores the Internet after a weeklong government-imposed shutdown, new videos purport to show the demonstrations over gasoline prices rising and the security-force crackdown that followed.

The videos offer only fragments of encounters, but to some extent they fill in the larger void left by Iran's state-controlled television and radio channels. On their airwaves, hard-line officials allege that foreign conspiracies and exile groups instigated the unrest. In print, newspapers offered only PR for the government or had merely stenographic reporting at

best, the moderate daily Hamshahri said in an analysis Sunday. They don't acknowledge that the gasoline price hike Nov. 15, supported by its civilian government, came as Iran's 80 million people already have seen their savings dwindle and jobs scarce under crushing US sanctions. President Donald Trump imposed them in the aftermath of unilaterally withdrawing America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

Authorities also have yet to give any overall figures for how many people were injured, arrested or killed during the several days of protests that swept across some 100 cities and towns.

Amnesty International said it believes the unrest and the crackdown killed at least 106 people. Iran disputes that figure without offering its own. A UN office earlier said it feared the unrest may have killed "a significant number of people."

Starting Nov. 16, Iran shut down the Internet across the country, limiting communications with the outside world. That made determining the scale and longevity of the protests incredibly difficult. Some recycled days-old videos and photographs as new, making it even more difficult.

Since Saturday, Internet connectivity spiked in the country, allowing people to access foreign websites for the first time. On Sunday, connectivity stood nearly at 100% for landline services, while mobile phone Internet service remained scarce, the advocacy group NetBlocks said.

The restoration brought messaging apps back to life for Iranians cut off from loved ones abroad. It also meant that videos again began being shared widely. Recently released videos span the country. One video from Shiraz, some 680 kilometers (420 miles) south of Tehran, purports to show a crowd of over 100 people scatter as gunfire erupts from a police station in the city. One man bends down to pick up debris as a person off-camera describes demonstrators throwing stones. Another gunshot rings out, followed by a burst of machine gun fire.

In Kerman, some 800 kilometers (500 miles) southeast of Tehran, the sound of breaking glass echoes over a street where debris burns in the center of a street. Motorcycle-riding members of the Basij, the all-volunteer force of Iran's paramilitary Guard, then chase the protesters away.

Another video in Kermanshah, some 420 kilometers (260 miles) southwest of Tehran, purports shows the dangers that lurked on the streets of Iran in recent days. Plainclothes security forces, some wielding nightsticks, drag one man off by the hair of his head. The detained man falls at one point. "Look, (the agents) wear styles like the youth," one man off-camera says, swearing at them.

On Sunday, it remained unclear if and how widespread any remaining demonstrations were. The acting commander of the Revolutionary Guard, Gen. Ali Fadavi, repeated the allegation that America was behind the protests, without offering any evidence to support his claim.

"Why did (the Americans) get angry after we cut off the Internet? Because the Internet is the channel through which Americans wanted to perform their evil and vicious acts," Fadavi said. "We will deal with this, Islamic Republic supporters, and our proud men and women will sign up to make a domestic system similar to the Internet with operating systems that (the Americans) can't (control) even if they want."

That likely refers to what has been known as the "halal net," Iran's own locally controlled version of the Internet aimed at restricting what the

public can see. The system known as the National Information Network has some 500 government-approved national websites that stream content far faster than those based abroad, which are intentionally slowed, activists say. Iranian officials say it allows the Islamic Republic to be independent if the world cuts it off instead.

It looks like a scene taken from a Hollywood movie, but this is Iran.

Innocent people are being beaten, arrested and killed.

Iranian people need our support! They don't have a voice.

[#IranProtests](#) pic.twitter.com/cdELrfTYYx

– Hananya Naftali (@HananyaNaftali) [November 23, 2019](#)

But while Fadavi earlier said the protests were put down in 48 hours, he also acknowledged the scope of the unrest by comparing it to Operation Karbala-4, one of the worst military disasters suffered by Iran during its bloody 1980s war with Iraq.

That scope could be seen in one video. In the capital, Tehran, footage earlier aired by the BBC's Persian service shot from a car purports to show a tableau of violence on Sattarkhan Street, as anti-riot police officers clashed with protesters.

In the video, a woman's scream rises over the shouts of the crowd as plainclothes security forces wearing white surgical masks accost one man, who puts his hands up to his face and hunches over to shield his body. Men walk backward to watch the chaos amid police with batons and riot shields, then run.

A woman in a green headscarf argues with one anti-riot police officer in front of a car.

"What do you say?" the police officer asks.

"He kicked my car," she responds.

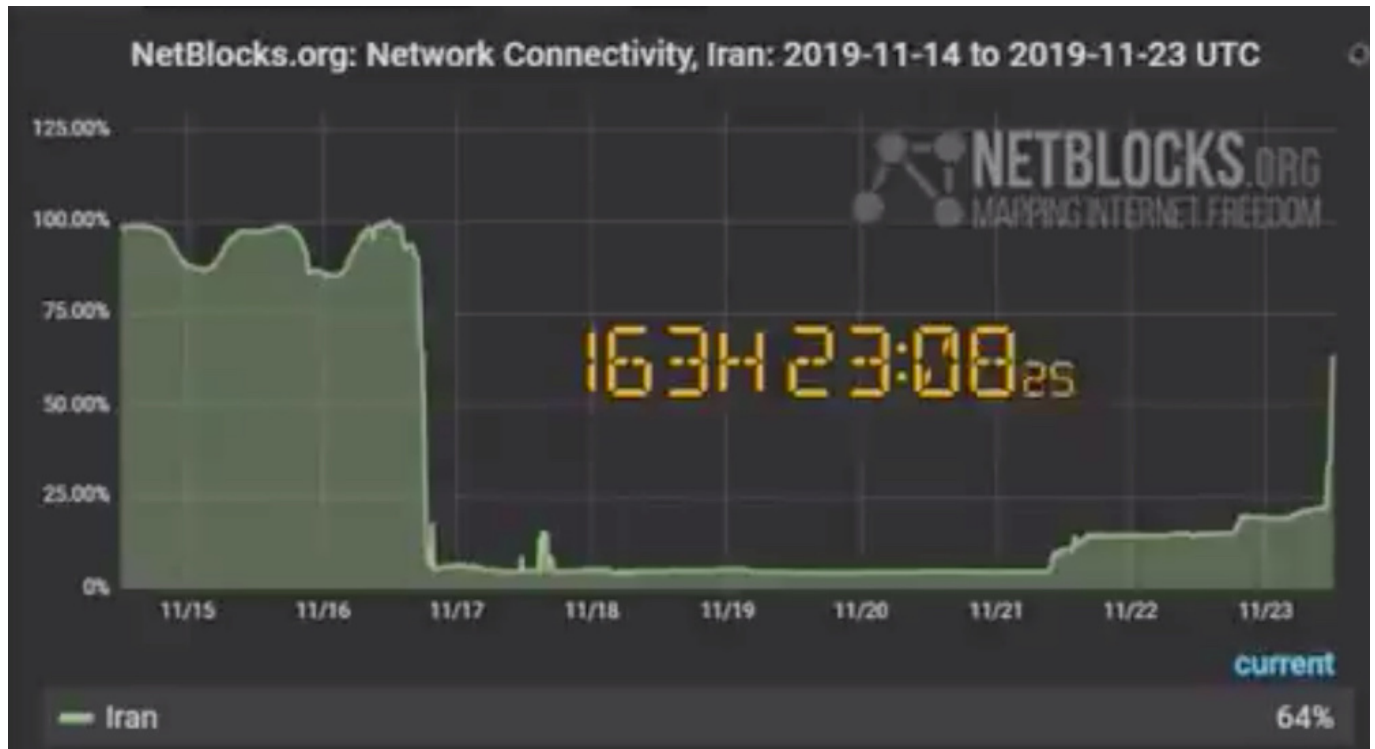
"Move," the police officer orders. "Whom do you want to blame in this situation?"

Someone chases a man in front of a bank as people curse. The car makes a right-hand turn onto another street. A police officer off-camera shouts:

"Come here!"

"Go, go, go!" a woman in the car cries out.

The car speeds away, passing burning debris. The clip ends. It lasts only 35 seconds.



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US urges social media platforms to block Iran officials
Iran warns regional states of consequences if they stoked unrest

[Hezbollah MPs step up attacks on US over Lebanon 'meddling'](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-11-24 01:04

BEIRUT: Hezbollah and its allies in the Lebanese government on Saturday widened their attacks on the US over alleged meddling in the country's political future.

In an interview with the Central News Agency (Al-Markazia), Muhammad Fneish, Hezbollah's minister in the caretaker government, referred to "foreign interference in our affairs" and said: "We want to form a sovereign government that is distant from US desires and foreign accounts."

He said that recent statements by former US ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman had "complicated matters."

Feltman told a US House of Representatives hearing last Tuesday that most Lebanese people have lost faith in Hezbollah and that there is growing anger against Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil for providing "Christian cover" for

the militant party.

The comments sparked outrage in Lebanon with Hezbollah and its allies accusing the former envoy of "interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs." Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem joined the criticism on Saturday, accusing the US of "meddling in the formation of a new Lebanese government."

"Hezbollah is determined not to fall into strife," he said, adding: "I do not see signs of a civil war in Lebanon."

As widespread street protests in the country entered their 38th day, MP Salim Aoun, a member of the parliamentary bloc loyal to the president and the Free Patriotic Movement, claimed that protesters have created a "political movement."

"No matter what we give them, nothing pleases them," he said, accusing international bodies of backing the demonstrations.

"We know who is intervening and what their goals are," Aoun said.

Amal MP and Hezbollah ally Ali Bazzi asked: "Is it true that there is aim to create a political vacuum and chaos in the country?"

Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin also questioned the motives of the civil movement. Speaking in Beirut, he said that "people's demands have turned against Hezbollah, and this is a very serious matter."

Zasytkin urged "the Lebanese parties to find a compromise solution that satisfies everyone on the formation of a government."

However, former Future Movement MP Mustafa Alloush described Hezbollah's claims of US meddling as "ridiculous."

"To say that the US is behind a movement that brought thousands of people on to the streets to demand tax cuts and jobs is a ridiculous accusation. Will they prosecute people for high treason?" he asked.

"Hezbollah supporters who are paid by Iran, take up arms, and fight and kill people, are not held accountable. How does this make sense?"

Public affairs analyst Walid Fakhreddine also rejected claims of a US conspiracy, saying: "We have seen these accusations at the beginning of the movement and now they are back. We were accused of treason and of receiving funding for the protests. They do not understand what is happening. People are now in a different place."

Fakhreddine warned that the ruling class is "dragging the country into financial and economic collapse."

"They insist on leading the country into bankruptcy. What is required is an independent transitional government that will hold early elections," he said.

"They think people are revolting because they want to be represented in government. This is not true. The civil movement does not want to share power. We are looking for a homeland. They accuse us of demagoguery. We are a people who want real reform, not their corrupt reform."



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Students burn history books as protests continue in Lebanon
Lebanon confusion: Uneasy calm descends on Beirut amid 'fear of what is to come'

[107 Democrats challenge Pompeo's recognition of illegal Israeli settlements](#)

Sun, 2019-11-24 00:41

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement recognizing the legitimacy of Israel's illegal settlement movement has prompted one of the largest protests challenging Israeli policies in the US Congress.

107 members of Congress, all Democrats, signed a letter on Friday (Nov. 22) rebuking Pompeo for his declaration recognizing the settlements.

Only one of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's seven-member Democratic leadership team, Majority Whip James Clyburn of South Carolina, signed the letter. That exposes the hypocrisy of Congressional Democrats, including Pelosi, who have criticized President Donald Trump for shifts in longstanding policy on Israel and Palestine, but refrained from challenging those policies directly or offered counter legislation.

Pompeo's declaration was surprising but not unusual, reflecting the views of past Republican administrations which favor Israel over international law. Even Democratic administrations that criticized the settlements continued to ignore Israel's settlement expansion which grew under every Trump predecessor at an alarming rate, including President Barack Obama.

"The establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law," Pompeo said, including several important and ignored qualifications. He added the view did not reflect an opinion on the legal status of any individual settlement, nor was Trump declaring that the settlements were not subject to changes through direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

But the declaration itself was enough to prompt the 107 Democrats, led by Congressman Andy Levin, to issue a blistering attack on Trump and Pompeo's actions.

The letter also criticizes Trump's recent decisions to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital outside of a negotiated settlement, the occupied Syrian Golan Heights as part of Israel, annexation of the Jordan Valley, and other actions including the halting of financial aid to Palestine and the closure of the Palestinian Mission in Washington D.C. as undermining peace and encouraging more violence.

The letter warned that the Trump administration's actions and Pompeo's declaration on settlements "would destroy prospects for a two-state solution and lead to a more entrenched and possibly deadlier conflict, this decision erodes the security of both Israel and the US."

The letter is signed by Jewish, Christian and Muslim members including several who have been consistently outspoken in challenging Israel's violence against Palestinian civilians such as Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Betty McCollum and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Not included are Congressman Dan Lipinski, whose Illinois 3rd District represents one of the largest concentrations of Palestinian Americans in the country. Lipinski is being challenged by progressive Marie Newman who has embraced the Two-State Solution and criticized Trump's declarations, and Palestinian-American Rush Darwish. Newman came within 2,000 votes of unseating the five-term Lipinski, while this is Darwish's first election run.

The eight-page lrebuke does not hold back on the damage Pompeo and Trump have brought to the delicate Israeli-Palestinian peace process, arguing that by ignoring international law in this respect, the Trump administration is also undermining international law for human rights and undermining "America's

moral standing.”

“This State Department decision blatantly disregards Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which affirms that any occupying power shall not ‘deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies,’” the letter continues.

“In ignoring international law, this administration has undermined America’s moral standing and sent a dangerous message to those who do not share our values: Human rights and international law, which have governed the international order and protected US troops and civilians since 1949, no longer apply. If the US unilaterally abandons international and human rights law, we can only expect a more chaotic and brutal 21st century for Americans and our allies, including the Israeli people.”

The US Congress has 435 members including 233 Democrats, 197 Republicans and 1 independent. Justin Amash, who was a member of the Republican Party representing the 3rd Congressional District, abandoned the GOP, criticizing Trump’s policies to become an independent. But Amash, who is also a Palestinian-American, did not sign the letter.



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Israeli settlement goods should be labeled, court told