Revolution and Counter-Revolution in the Tripoli Protests in Lebanon

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Abstract

As the “October Revolution” of 2019 spread throughout Lebanon, the northern city of Tripoli soon became a veritable hotbed of protests. Over several weeks, the city saw a string of the largest anti-government protests in the country, thus earning the moniker “Bride of Revolution” (‘Arus al-Thawrah). However, it did not take long for things to begin to fall apart. Tripoli would soon give a picture of a not-so-glorious protest movement, penetrated by a potpourri of scheming elements of the Lebanese kleptocracy and business elites and geopolitical interests. The revolutionary slogans and bonds that connected the city’s sectarian mosaic proved ephemeral. The ontological vibrancy, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of the protest movement gave way to political monotony, sameness, and ideological harmony. This paper provides an explanation of how the revolution coexisted, and often perilously so, with its nemesis – counterrevolution – in the protest movement in Tripoli.

Keywords

Lebanon – Arab Spring – Tripoli protests – Sunnis – democratization – counterrevolution – revolution – social movement

It seemed like déjà vu all over again, but it was not to last. In scenes reminiscent of the months-long wave of angry protests that swept Lebanon triggered on October 17, 2019, by a government plan to tax internet voice call services, the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli was racked, between January 25 and 31, 2021, by clashes between security forces and protesters venting their anger at a round-the-clock coronavirus lockdown that has compounded their hardships
in a collapsing economy. One person was killed, and hundreds injured, including dozens of security forces personnel, as security forces fired tear gas, rubber bullets and, even, live rounds to disperse protesters hurling stones and Molotov cocktails and trying to storm the city’s municipal and governorate administration buildings. The city’s municipality building was set ablaze and the guard room at the governorate building, the Serail, caught fire (Al Jazeera 2021, Dahan and Abdallah 2021, France 24 2021, TRT World 2021).

The January 2021 bout of protests in Tripoli was a telling reminder of the appropriation of the protest movement in Lebanon, dubbed the “October Revolution,” by a potpourri of internal and external actors with counterrevolutionary agendas brought together by the ironic twists of Lebanese, and regional, politics. The nationwide protests which flared up in October 2019 saw massive crowds venting their anger at the corrupt and sectarian political class notorious for its graft, cronyism, nepotism, and ineptitude. But, from its very early days in October 2019, there was a side to the October Revolution that showed a not-so-glorious picture in which elements of the entrenched political and business class, as well as external actors, infiltrated and steered the movement towards their own agendas. Tripoli, a veritable hotbed of the October Revolution, has been no exception in this regard. In this article, I intend to show how the revolution coexisted, and often perilously so, with its nemesis – counterrevolution – in the protest movement in Tripoli.

The story of the Tripoli protests directs attention to the pitfalls of the prevailing assumption of a teleology of democracy that pervades the literature on the Arab Spring – as well as much of the “transitology” literature in political science – that sees Arab Spring-like protests and popular contention as inevitably revolutionary and democratic undertakings. The democratic, all-inclusive momentum of the early period of the protests could not be maintained because it was not organized independently of particularistic and regional state interests. By shedding light on how the entrenched Lebanese political and business classes responded to, infiltrated, and redirected the protests, this paper points to the heterogeneous outcomes of contentious politics in the Arab world, including the reproduction of old norms and corrupt and clientelistic behavioral patterns of political elites.

**Lebanon’s October Revolution**

On October 17, 2019, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese from all walks of life took to the streets of downtown Beirut to protest a government decision a day earlier to impose a new USD 6 monthly tax on internet-based voice call
services, such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook Messenger. Within hours the protests spread to major cities and towns across the country forcing the government to rescind the proposed levy. But as the government’s gesture failed to placate the protesters, whose anger was fueled by the country’s slide down the slippery slope of a full economic meltdown under an unsustainable public debt-to-GDP burden above 170%, the protests swelled into a national anti-government protest movement (NBC News 2019, TRT World 2019). The spectacular spread of the protests did not occur in vacuum. The country was ripe for an explosion in mass mobilization. Pronounced anti-government resentment had been growing for years, fueled by government failure to deal with a succession of crisscrossing and overlapping national crises and the country’s deepening economic woes. The government’s mismanagement of solid waste collection and disposal, exemplified by the overfilling of dumpsites and the failure to implement waste-to-energy schemes, came to a head in July 2015 when garbage collection came to a standstill for eight months during which mountains of rotting garbage piled up on the streets. A full solution to the garbage crisis has yet to be found (Azzi 2017; Verdeil 2018).

Meanwhile, over the course of several years, the economy was sinking deeper into the mire and its sacred cow – the financial system which has been described as a nationally regulated Ponzi scheme where new debts are used to pay existing creditors – was becoming increasingly fragile (Blair 2020). Just days before the eruption of the protest movement in October 2019, devastating wildfires, fanned by gusty winds and high temperatures, swept from the Shouf mountains to the south of Beirut to a couple of kilometres just outside the capital. The government drew fresh criticism for its lack of preparedness and poor handling of the wildfire crisis, especially as it emerged that firefighting helicopters donated to Lebanon in 2009 had fallen into disrepair and had become non-operational (Azhari 2019). Throughout these years of national convulsions and a steadily tanking economy, popular protests became a common occurrence and stentorian criticism of government has become widespread. Shortly before the eruption of the protests on October 17, 2019, Tripoli was the scene of two demonstrations which marched through the city’s streets and stopped in front of the houses of some MPs, where some demonstrators chanted slogans and screamed curses against the lawmakers (Rifa’i 2019).

The October 2019 protests were, however, massive, providing a rare display of mass cross-sectarian solidarity in a country where sectarianism is deeply rooted in social and political life. Political parties largely reflect the sectarian divides in the country, and political power is distributed according to a delicate sectarian balance. No wonder that the protests soon turned on the sectarian political class whom the protesters held responsible for the country’s...
deepening and dire economic crisis. Moreover, this extraordinarily inclusive mobilization not only brought together protesters who had previously remained separated from each other, such as students and labor unions, but also brought to the streets fence-sitters who had not previously joined protests, such as the urban upper middle class and retired military personnel. In terms of ideological affiliations, the protesters were an odd mix of leftists, including communists, Syrian nationalists, Arab nationalists, including Nasserites and Ba’athists, right-wing Phalangists and Lebanese Forces partisans, and devoutly religious crowds. This was made possible by heightened emotions and anger, a feature that is common to Arab Spring protests (Benski and Langman 2013). Add to this combustible mix increasingly dire economic conditions with rising inflation and unemployment.

In many ways, the early weeks of the October Revolution were a particular cultural and liberating moment. The protesters erected tents which became centers not only for protest organization but also forums for political debate about the country’s future. The mass movement also created space for feminist mobilization. “Across the country, women were at the frontline calling for their rights, they led marches, reclaimed the streets and often fearlessly formed barriers between the security forces and the protesters” (Kassir 2019).

Such diversity and inclusiveness point to the potentialities of the protest movement as a revolutionary social force. However, like all social revolutionary upheavals, the October protest movement in Lebanon elicited a counter-revolutionary response from the establishment. As Mayer (2000, p. 47) aptly put it, when faced with a revolutionary upheaval, “the old elites tend to mend their fences even if they fail to agree on a common strategy to restabilize the situation in their favor.” In the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution in the Lebanese protest movement, this response took several forms, foremost of which has been elite infiltration and the channeling of communal anxieties and hatreds aiming to direct the movement against political adversaries and restore influence and hegemony. It is the manifestations of this essential characteristic of the counterrevolutionary response in the protest movement in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli which constitute the focus of this paper.

In the heat of the protests, a lively artistic and cultural scene emerged. In uniquely euphoric and exuberant scenes, protesters played music, danced, and sang to blaring music amid a colorful sea of Lebanese flags in a symbolic affirmation of a Lebanese national identity that transcends the particularistic societal cleavages and sectarian fault-lines. On one occasion, protesters joined hands to form a human chain stretching along the Lebanese coast from the north to the south (“With Lebanon in Deadlock” 2019). Street artists spray-painted murals that encapsulated the protesters’ demands in colorful forms
(“How are Lebanese protesters using art” 2019). Sculptors produced sculptures that embodied the ideals of the protest movement. One sculpture, dubbed the Phoenix, was assembled from the debris of protest tents destroyed when protesters’ camps were ransacked by supporters of political parties, including the Shi’ite Amal movement, angry at protesters’ slogans targeting their party leaders (MacKenzie 2019). Another sculpture, named “Revolution is a Woman,” displayed the figure of “a woman waving the Lebanese flag, and [was] made from materials left behind at protest sites such as plastic bottles and cans. It [was] a nod to the widespread recycling that protesters [had] carried out in response to the country’s long term waste crises.” (“Lebanon’s Protests and Sculpture” 2020).

Driven by grievances such as unemployment and lack of hope for the future amid a deepening economic crisis, the youth were heavily represented in the protesters’ ranks – a phenomenon seen in Arab Spring protests in general (Hoffmann and Jamal 2014). They brought into the protests not only their youthfulness and energy but also their buoyant spirit, refined digital skills and remarkable ability to employ lessons learned from previous Arab Spring protests that posed serious challenges to the established orders in such countries as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Sudan, and had in some cases toppled hegemonic elites that had long been ensconced in the corridors of power. In that vein, the protesters blended street and digital activism. Employing classical street tactics, they blocked roads with burning tires, garbage cans and dumpsters, dirt, debris, old cars and the like, and engaged security forces in running battles during which they pelted the security personnel with stones and sticks, threw back tear gas canisters at them, and carried onions to sniff in order to reduce the effects of tear gas. But the protesters also used social media to network, organize horizontally and tilt the balance of power from state authorities to their side. One such network, which organizers called “Joker,” adopted a national, decentralized form of organization and engaged in targeted graffiti and poster campaigns, with graffiti and posters aimed at selected categories of institutions such as banks and state-owned service providers. “Joker was an active group all over Lebanon,” said Shadi Nashshabeh (2021), a writer and civil activist in Tripoli who was arrested twice for his activism.

We used to wear red [clothes] and put masks on. We would carry out the same act [simultaneously] in several parts of Lebanon. For example, spraying graffiti at the electricity company in Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, and so on. We usually would not announce our activities in advance. Most of them were sudden. We used to communicate through WhatsApp and Telegram for planning purposes. We were trying to institute decentralization.
The groups did not know each other. There was only a liaison officer between them to evade infiltration.

The heavy use of social media and text-messaging contributed to a rapid demonstration effect, exemplified by the diffusion of the protests throughout the country almost overnight.

The protest movement was decentralized, steered by a multitude of groups and organizations that lacked a centralized command and failed to forge interest-based alliances and a unified strategy against the corrupt political oligarchy. Accordingly, the leaderless, cross-sectarian protests had diffuse agendas and made a seemingly unrelated cacophony of demands ranging from recovering embezzled public money, ending the increasingly dire economic conditions, the formation of a cabinet made up of independent technocrats, and the enactment of laws safeguarding women’s rights all the way to overthrowing the sectarian political order.

The lack of cohesion provided windows of opportunity for counterrevolutionary forces, including entrenched elites and external political actors, and agents provocateurs to infiltrate the protest movement in a bid to divert it in order to undermine, character assassinate and settle scores with political rivals. Mayer (2000, p. 47) stresses that “both civil society and polity are wired for preservation, not sudden death, and their agents will give battle for their survival.” This score-settling drive was all too apparent in the coining and propagation by supporters of the pro-Western March 14 Alliance, especially the Lebanese Forces party, of slogans using obscenities directed at former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, thus turning him into a bête noire for wide segments of the protesters. Another slogan purported on the face of it to be a root-and-branch assault on the political establishment but was in essence directed at lumping Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in the public mind with the corrupt political class that has for decades been plundering public resources for personal gain: “All of them means all of them, and Nasrallah is one of them!” (Killun ya’ani killun, wa Nasrallah wahid minnum!). Such gambits, along with the use of tactics as the blockage of roads, especially roads leading to areas where certain communities predominate, such as the coastal road to the predominantly Shi’ite south, not only dampened enthusiasm for the protest movement, but also pushed it down the slippery slope of identity politics. This created wide gaps between the movement and groups whose perceptions of existential risks were heightened by these tactics. Embedded in the Freudian line of analysis in political psychology, Michel G. Nehme’s (2003, 1995/96) research has drawn attention to the role of individual and collective communal fears in solidifying communal sectarian identities.
Under pressure by the protesters who rejected his reform proposals, including abolishing some ministries and public spending cuts, such as 50% salary cuts for MPs, as too short of their demands for radical structural reforms, Prime Minister Sa’ad al-Hariri resigned on October 29, 2019. In a speech that was cheered at protest gatherings in downtown Beirut with boos, expletives and chants of “Thawrah! Thawrah!” (Revolution! Revolution!), Hariri claimed that his resignation was intended to serve “the country’s dignity and safety” by causing a “positive shock” (Chulov 2019). Unimpressed, the protesters continued to press on with their demands.

Hariri declined offers to form a new cabinet. After nearly two months of wrangling over the nomination of a new Prime Minister, outgoing Minister of Education, Hassan Diab, was designated as Prime Minister in December and his technocratic 20-member cabinet received a vote of confidence in Parliament in February 2020. But Diab’s government, which enjoyed the support of the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance, failed to carry out its promised reforms, tackle endemic corruption, and lift the country out of its dire economic doldrums and stem its slide into a major economic crisis, the like of which the world had not witnessed for the past century and a half (World Bank 2021). His cabinet was forced to resign under a barrage of pressure and fury over the massive and deadly Beirut port explosion in August 2020. In a speech announcing the cabinet resignation, he admitted: “I said before that corruption is rooted in every lever of the state, but I have discovered that corruption is greater than the state” (Georgy and Francis 2020). It took more than a year for Lebanon’s squabbling political leaders to form a new government headed by Najib Miqati in September 2021.

Eventually, the euphoria of the early days of the October Revolution fizzled out and the protests ran aground as the spread of COVID-19 and government-imposed lockdowns to respond to the pandemic put a damper on public gatherings. But the protests continued to be an on-again, off-again occurrence, as seen in the spikes of sometimes violent protests following the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, and at memorials commemorating the one-year anniversary of the blast that killed 218 people, injured some 7,000, destroyed large parts of the city center, damaged 77,000 apartments and displaced over 300,000 people (Human Rights Watch 2021; Nasser 2021). As euphoria petered out, a deepening sense of despondency and despair set in (Patience 2020).

Tripoli: “Bride of the Revolution”

The protests in Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city located on the coast about 85 kilometres (53 miles) to the north of Beirut, were a mirror image
of the grass-roots protest movement that swept the country. No sooner had
the government announced the new tax on internet voice calls than calls for
mass protests spread quickly throughout Tripoli via word of mouth and social
media. As one protest organizer described:

The WhatsApp tax came ... and we felt that there was something wrong
in the country. Several groups began to call for street demonstrations.
The youth component uses WhatsApp a lot; therefore, the tax decision
affected it directly. When we first went out [to the streets], we went out
primarily against the WhatsApp tax. Then the snowball became larger,
and people began to feel that they can escalate their demands and call
for overthrowing the regime, especially after they sensed the media at-
tention and coverage (Nashshabeh 2021).

Tripoli soon turned into a hotbed for protests as tens of thousands of demon-
strators converged on the Al-Nour Square, adorned with a huge metal sculp-
ture of the Arabic word “Allah” (God) erected on a pedestal with the inscription
“Tripoli is the citadel of Muslims” (Tarablus qal'at al-Muslimin), a testimony
to the largely conservative Sunni Muslim character of the city and its popu-
lation. Over several weeks, Al-Nour Square became a gathering space for an
uninterrupted nightly string of some of the largest anti-government protests
in the country, thus earning the city the moniker “Bride of Revolution” (’Arus
al-Thawrah).

The protests in Tripoli were at least partly planned and funded. The pre-
planning for the protests in Tripoli remains one of the most mysterious and less
talked about aspects of the protest movement. But the wall of reticence on
the topic is not impenetrable. “There was some funding and preparation for the
unrest,” said Shadi Nashshabeh (2021), a Tripolitan writer and activist. “There
were different groups [involved]. But people were venting their anger ... True,
people were very angry, but the logistics were funded.” Likewise, reflecting on
the outbreak of the protest movement about fifteen months later, a street activ-
ist (Bakish 2021) stoutly fumed: “Now, I feel that someone has pushed us into
the revolution. The movement was suspicious ... I feel that there were people
with [dubious] connections with us who manipulated us.” Civil society activ-
ists leveraged their organizational skills and the Western-funded resources of
their Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to network, mobilize protests
and finance protest-related activities. This was explained by one writer from
Tripoli, who spoke on condition of strict anonymity because he feared for his
safety, saying:
There are some 40 [civil society] associations devoted to healthcare and social services and to the provision of assistance and the like. They receive funding from foreign embassies. For example, Shadi Nashshabeh works with the US embassy. They played a larger role in the first stage of the revolution which toppled Sa’ad [al-Hariri] (Anonymous Writer 2021).

The role civil society played in the protest movement in Tripoli, and in Lebanon in general, is consistent with the findings of recent social science research on the role of NGOs in political participation, including political protest, in weak democracies. Carew Boulding (2014, 2010) has investigated the impact of civil society on political participation in Latin America and has found that, in weak democracies, NGOs encourage people to engage in contentious politics and to express their aspirations and grievances through various forms of street activity, including protest rallies and riots.

In addition to civil society, seasoned local activists with years of experience in organizing demonstrations, sit-ins and other street protest actions played a role in mobilizing the protests in Tripoli. One street activist (Bakish 2021) said that when calls for protest gatherings at Al-Nour Square began circulating via WhatsApp on October 17, 2019, he was already engaged in preparations to stage demonstrations in front of the houses of government officials in the city:

We were drawing up plans to march on the house of [lawmaker and then former Prime Minister] Najib Miqati and the houses of other MPs. I received a call from Ahmad al-Fawwal, [another local street activist], who told me there was a WhatsApp campaign [calling for protests]. So, we went to Al-Nour Square. We were only a small number of people. Then people began to come in big numbers.

Especially during the early weeks of the movement, the Tripoli protests were transformed into joyous and festive gatherings that conjure up the concept of carnival as articulated by Bakhtin (1998) where ordinary life and hierarchical structures are suspended, and cultural and societal mores are defied. The protesters included people from diverse age groups: youth, elderly, and whole families with their children joined in. They came from all walks of life in the city, thus cutting across the rigid class, educational and sectarian divides and transforming the anti-government disturbances into a mass rebellious assault against social hierarchies of power, status and privilege. The educated strata were heavily involved in the early wave of protests through the participation of university students and academics and local professional unions, such as the Order of Engineers and Architects in Tripoli, the Lebanese Order of
Physicians – Tripoli, and the Tripoli Bar Association (Anonymous Writer 2021). The ideological backgrounds of the protesters were very diverse, spanning the ideological spectrum from Communists to Islamists.

Perhaps the most notable achievement of the protests in this context was that they acted as a momentary bridge between the city’s Sunni majority and Alawite minority, concentrated in the Jabal Muhsin quarter. Mukhtar Salih (2021), an Alawite community activist affiliated with Sa‘ad al-Hariri’s Future Movement and former chief of staff of Rif‘at Eid, the leader of the predominantly Alawite, pro-Syrian Arab Democratic Party, said:

There was heavy participation from Jabal Muhsin in the October 17 Revolution. There also were protests in Jabal Muhsin. Tripoli is for all. It is the city of [religious] erudition and clerics: Muslims and Christians. We are all brothers. Unfortunately, they transformed Tripoli into something nonexistent. They took it to extremism ... The protests in Tripoli are very rightful. The fifth column spoiled the Revolution.

Bringing together Tripolitan Sunni and Alawite protesters in support of a common political cause is all too remarkable given that, over the past decades, the chasm between the two communities has not been only sectarian, but also political, ideological, and almost anthropological. In the 1980s and 1990s, age-old distrust and strained relations between the two communities grew as anti-Syrian Sunni Islamist and Salafist movements gained ground in the city while the Alawites overwhelmingly threw their support behind the Syrian government and its military intervention in Lebanon. The mounting tensions plunged the city into a whirlpool of recurrent sectarian clashes (Fadl 2008; Pall 2013). The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 exacerbated political and intercommunal tensions as it emboldened the Sunnis to challenge the Alawites’ military superiority that stemmed from Syrian patronage and support. Tensions flared into a series of bloody gun battles that pitted the Sunni quarter of Bab al-Tabbaneh – a cauldron of poverty, deprivation, and resentment – against the Alawite enclave of Jabal Muhsin between 2007 and 2014 (Lefèvre 2014).

Nothing exhibited the unalloyed carnivalesque spirit of the Tripoli protests more than the live festive music performances by DJ Madhi Karimeh, which transformed the main protest gathering square in Tripoli, the al-Nour Square, into something akin to exhilarating music concerts and dance parties. During the early days of the protests, a stage was set up in an abandoned building facing the Square where the DJ performed playlists featuring patriotic songs, including the national anthem, mixed with techno and other beats and vocals.
that he improvised and interspersed with references to the popular uprising (Abu Jalalah 2019, Bajec 2019).

The large crowds drawn to the protests in Tripoli brought into the open a widespread, deep, and visceral discontent borne out of decades of government neglect, under-development and marginalization. Tripoli was a destitute, deprived, and disillusioned “bride” that had long been gripped by gnawing doubts about its future economic prospects. By all economic indicators, Tripoli and its inhabitants were the most impoverished and deprived in the country. A few years before the protests that started in October 2019, a comprehensive report on poverty in Tripoli by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2015) found that 51% of households in the city had an income below the poverty line of USD 3.29 per day. It also found stark poverty differentials across neighborhoods within the city, with al-Tabbaneh-Suwayqah topping the list at 76% of households followed by 63% in Jabal Muhsin. High rates of deprivation compound the effects of endemic poverty in Tripoli. The ESCWA study found that Tripoli suffered very high household deprivation rates in four sectors: education (25%), healthcare (35%), housing (35%), and economic conditions (77%), including asset ownership and job and income security.

The effects of the Syrian crisis further exacerbated Tripoli’s already dire economic conditions. Syria’s plunge into devastating civil strife, and the associated large flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon and closure of transit routes through Syria, had unequivocally adverse spillover effects on the Lebanese economy. These effects included a drop in Syrian demand for Lebanese goods and services, pressure on the provision of services, and high supply of cheap labour by Syrian refugees (International Labour Organization 2014, Hamdar et al. 2018). “The Syrian [refugees] work for wages less than those acceptable by the Tripolitans,” Shaykh Bilal Sha’aban (2021), Secretary-General of the Islamic Unification Movement (Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami), whose activities are concentrated in the city, told me in an interview. “The Tripolitan, for example, wants USD 10 or 20 dollars a day. The Syrian works in return for 10,000 [Lebanese] liras [the equivalent of about 1.5 dollars at the time of the interview]. That caused huge unemployment among the Tripolitans.”

It is not only economic uncertainty that turned Tripoli into a hotbed of the protest movement. An increasingly conservative Sunni city since the early 1980s, the political tremors of the deepening Sunni-Shi’ite sectarian rift in Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990 were especially felt in Tripoli. Anti-Shi’ite sentiment heightened in Tripoli with the rise of Salafism and spilled over beyond Salafist circles (Pall 2018). With the murder of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on February 14, 2005, the city turned resolutely anti-Syrian. In keeping
with the city’s staunchly conservative Sunni bent, Tripolitans overwhelmingly looked askance at the mounting political influence of Hezbollah, the powerful Iranian-backed Shi’ite political party and non-state armed group. The wells of Tripolitan resentment towards Hezbollah ran deeper after armed elements from the Shi’ite party and its allies took over Beirut on May 7, 2008, thwarting a government decision to shut down Hezbollah’s telecommunications network. Summing up the trauma this event wrought on the Sunni collective consciousness is the label *naksah* (setback) employed to describe it by some Sunni religious clerics (International Crisis Group 2008). The same label is used to describe the Arab ignominious defeat by the Israelis in the 1967 War. Such communal narratives of victimization would play a role in the slide of the protest movement in Tripoli to a counterrevolutionary *cul de sac*. The role cultural narratives play in driving counterrevolutionary responses has been noted by Bello (2019) in his comparative study of far-right counterrevolutionary movements.

Adding insult to injury, Hezbollah and its allies, including Sunnis, came to dominate parliament following the 2018 elections (Kenner 2018). In a deeply divided society where politics is viewed as a zero-sum game, Sunni Tripolitans saw the increased influence of pro-Iranian Hezbollah as a reflection of a perceived waning of Sunni influence in Lebanon and the broader region. Hezbollah’s instrumental support that secured the election of President Michel Aoun in October 2016, thus ending a stalemate that left the country without a head of state for nearly two years and a half, excited hostility and revulsion among Sunni Tripolitans towards Aoun and his presidency (‘ahd). Aoun’s election was made possible following a political deal between Sa’ad al-Hariri and Aoun whose essential elements were shaped by Hezbollah and provided for a new term as Prime Minister for Hariri in return for his support for Aoun’s presidential bid. Hariri’s 2019 agreement with former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, Aoun’s son-in-law, which facilitated the formation of another cabinet headed by Hariri, only fanned the flames of Sunni anger at Hariri in Tripoli. Widely seen as timid sops to Hezbollah and its allies among Sunnis, the agreements amplified a feeling of Sunni “leadership vacuum” (Nashshabeh 2021). Against this backdrop, the protests that erupted in October 2017 were an occasion for many Tripolitans to flaunt their hardening anti-establishment stance, exorcise their perceived communal humiliations, and attempt to reverse political setbacks that had accumulated over the past years.

**Retreat to Counterrevolution**

It did not take long after the eruption of the October 2019 protest movement for things to begin to fall apart. The trajectory of the protests in Tripoli would
soon give rise to a host of questions about hidden agendas behind the protests. The movement began to project a picture of a not-so-glorious movement, penetrated by scheming elements of the Lebanese kleptocracy and business elites and external geopolitical interests. The revolutionary slogans and bonds that connected the city’s sectarian mosaic proved ephemeral. The ontological vibrancy, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of the protest movement gave way to political monotony, sameness, and ideological harmony.

Activists affiliated to political parties led by members of the Lebanese kleptocracy, including constituent groups of the March 14 Alliance, positioned themselves at the head of the protest campaign in Tripoli, effectively running the show on the ground. Since the early days of the protest movement, their presence was evident at the stage erected at al-Nour Square, where they acted as gatekeepers screening and vetting speakers delivering speeches from the platform. These activists included elements from, inter alia, the Muslim Group (al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah), a Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organization, the anti-Hezbollah, anti-Syrian Seven Party (Hizb Saba‘ah) and the predominantly-Sunni so-called ‘Forums’ (Muntadayat) affiliated with Baha’ al-Hariri, the estranged eldest brother of Sa‘ad.1 At times, efforts by these activists to restrict access to the stage degenerated into heated arguments and instances when barred activists forced their way to the stage to deliver speeches (Bakish 2021).

Early in the protest movement, it became clear that the protests were likely to drag on and activists began to make efforts to provide protesters with free supplies, such as food and water, and logistical support, such as fuel and transport. At first, packaged meals and sandwiches were brought in from restaurants and distributed to protesters. Then tents and food stalls were erected to serve free food for demonstrators. Sustaining the protesters provided opportunities for well-funded business and political interests to infiltrate the unrest and direct the protests to serve their own purposes. Donations from local restaurants, businesses and wealthy individuals accounted for part of this support. These local donations were partly a genuine expression of solidarity with

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1 Established in 2018 by Sunni lawyer and human rights activist Nabil al-Halabi, the ‘Forums’ came to embody Sunni frustration with what was widely seen in the community as the weak leadership of Sa‘ad al-Hariri, especially after his 2016 political deal with Hezbollah and President Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement. The ‘Forums’ enjoyed generous financial support from Baha’ al-Hariri, who sought to transform the outfit into his own political party. However, in October 2020 Baha’ would abandon the ‘Forums’ amid acrimonious disagreements between him and his inner circle, on one side, and top figures in the ‘Forums,’ including Halabi, on the other. Reportedly, Baha’ has since been working on establishing his own political organization. See Antonios 2020, Sharrouf 2020, and al-Halabi 2021.
the protesters, partly motivated by opposition to the political establishment, and partly a sort of a ‘bribe’ aimed to spare local business owners the wrath of the protesters and the possibility of their businesses being ransacked, vandalized and/or looted by the protesters (Nashshabeh 2021).

However, other donations came from elements in the political kleptocracy and business oligarchy and were intended to serve their malevolent political ends. Jumping on the bandwagon of the protests, these elements began to funnel money and other resources to further fuel the protest movement. Tripolitan activists interviewed for this research named a host of political parties as having used money to infiltrate and influence the protests, including: the Maronite Lebanese Forces and Phalanges parties, the anti-Syrian Seven Party, the ‘Forums’ of Baha’ al-Hariri, and the Future Movement (Mustaqbal) of Sa’ad al-Hariri. Also using monetary resources to ratchet up and influence the protests were then-former Prime Minister Najib Miqati and three satellite TV networks with open political agendas, namely LBC, established by the Lebanese Forces in 1985 but then parted company with the party in the 1990s, New TV (al-Jadid), a station owned by anti-Hariri and Syria critic and wealthy businessman Tahsin Khayyat with significant left-leaning elements among its staff, and MTV, a Saudi-financed station owned by the vehemently anti-Syrian and anti-Hezbollah Maronite politician Michel al-Murr (Anonymous Activist 2 2021, Anonymous Writer 2021, Nashshabeh 2021, and Sha’aban 2021). The political parties and the three networks paid money to induce people to take part in the protests, rented buses to transport people to demonstrations in Tripoli, as well as from Tripoli to protests and sit-ins in Beirut, and provided food and water supplies. Eventually, “the forces that pay the money came to be in control of the field” (Sha’aban 2021).

Sa’ad al-Hariri saw in the Tripoli protests an opportunity to strengthen his hand in his disputes with adversaries among the political class, including defectors from his Future Movement such as former Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi and former Minister of Youth and Sports and former Acting Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat. Hariri hoped that the protests would increase his bargaining power vis-à-vis adversaries in political disputes, including over the terms of his return to the prime minister’s post. The presence of his partisans and associates on the ground enabled him to use the protests as a signaling instrument, raising the tempo of the protests to send political messages (Nashshabeh 2021). To that end, he relied on the party organization of his Future Movement and used the services of former local Sunni militia commanders who had led ragtag bands of militiamen in clashes with Alawite Jabal Muhsin between 2007 and 2014. One activist cites the case of Husam Murad, a former Sunni militia commander who worked with the Future Movement during the protests,
erecting a tent at the al-Nour Square and sending bands of youths and teenagers to block roads (Anonymous Activist 1 2021). Najib Miqati adopted a similar approach, using the services of former Sunni militia commander Sa’ad al-Masri (Bakish 2021).

A significant part of the money these special political and business interests spent on protest-related activities in Tripoli came from foreign sponsors or unaccounted financial flows funneled to influence and steer the protest movement. Accordingly, this financing can be characterized as “malign finance” which Rudolph and Morley (2020) define as “the funding of foreign political parties, candidates, campaigns, well-connected elites, or politically influential groups, often through non-transparent structures designed to obfuscate ties to a nation state or its proxies.” Some of these flows could be characterized as indirect financial support as in the case of NGOs that were receiving funding from foreign sources for specific projects but channeled some of these resources to support protest-related activities (Nashshabeh 2021). Civil society organizations are believed to have diverted some resources received from Western sources to implement development projects for such protest purposes as logistical support and transportation. Training programs funded by Western government sources, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), in areas such as leadership, promoting public participation in public decision-making, and building the skills of civil society activists as catalysts for change introduced activists to leadership and organizational skills that they could use in the context of the protest movement. However, more ominous was the direct covert financial support from regional countries, especially Gulf states, which played a significant part in financing the protest-related activities of political parties (Anonymous Writer 2021, Nashshabeh 2021, Salih 2021, Sha’aban 2021). Such financial support aimed to exercise leverage over the direction of the protest movement.

This funding had all the hallmarks of foreign interference that falls outside the scope of legitimate inter-state interactions. By combining lack of transparency and malicious intent, it met the two core criteria that constitute interference according to Berzina and Soulat (2020): i.e., transparency and intent. It ultimately had a damaging impact on the protests and the movement behind it.

In attempting to steer the Tripoli protest movement to their ends, these elements, whom Nashshabeh (2021) labelled as the “merchants of revolution” (tujjar al-thawrah), employed a strategy aimed at directing the anger of the protesters at Hezbollah and its allies in government. In so doing, they brought in highly charged rhetoric that resonated with politically divisive issues rather than the unifying themes of reform. As Shaykh Bilal Sha’aban (2021) said:
The demonstrations were incorporated into the political bazar ... the scene became miserable, saddening, and difficult to organize ... Because of the movement in Lebanon, a sort of a coming together between the revolutionaries from all over Lebanon occurred, and they [the protesters] stood in solidarity with each other. This was a positive thing. At the beginning of the movement, they [protesters in Tripoli] raised a banner saying ‘O’ Hussein’ to indicate that we had no problem with the Shi’ites. Then some elements entered and sectarianized the issue. At one point, some people from the Lebanese Forces came and raised slogans [calling] for the implementation of [UN Security Council] Resolution 1559 and disarming Hezbollah. Confusion ensued. They [some protesters] told them we do not approve of the arms [of Hezbollah] but this is not our cause.2

To add insult to injury, this strategy did not only excavate political divisions at the Tripoli protests. Sectarian passions were also inflamed. Nashshabeh (2021) describes how such ploys wrote the epitaph of mass, cross-sectarian demonstrations in Tripoli:

After one and a half months or forty days of rallying in the streets, people began to reduce their going out [to the protests] ... At one demonstration, the last huge demonstration in the city, one of the merchants of revolution brought a singer, and the revolution was against sectarianism. The singer sang against Hassan Nasrallah. At this point, some people began to withdraw because they felt that they had become part of a political game.

This was echoed by Sha’aban (2021), who recalls: “At first we participated. But after the slogans were sectarianized and the attacks against the security forces on the pretext that they are affiliated with Hezbollah, we reduced our participation. When there was talk about attacking the Serail and the security forces we reduced our going out [to the protests].”

Hence, antipathy toward Hezbollah and its allies, both inside and outside Lebanon, proved a flimsy basis for lasting cross-sectarian momentum and unity among the Tripoli protesters. In fact, it contributed to shredding the

early unity among the protesters by alienating major sections of participants and driving away potential protesters. Nowhere was this alienation more evident in the Tripoli protests than in the case of the Alawites and nationalists. As Alawite activist Mukhtar Salih (2021) stoutly intoned: “Our participation was heavy, but there are some who took the revolution to another place. When they took the revolution towards attacking Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, our participation receded. Those [attacks] amounted to politicizing the revolution.” On their part, nationalists started to suspect that the slogans were no longer endogenous to the movement but rather pre-prepared by foreign interests and sponsors.

Waving the banner of sectarianism and popularizing politically divisive slogans in hopes of gaining control of the protests, the “merchants of revolution” and other special interests could not contain the monster they had set loose. Eventually, the celebration of diversity and cross-sectarian unity encapsulated by the early protests became an image of a lost ideal. Little wonder that looking back at the protest movement in Tripoli now conjures up a mix of nostalgia and sorrow among some former protesters who had seen the protests taking a turn towards entrenching social and political divisions. A Tripolitan writer (Anonymous Writer 2021) bemoaned, in an interview, that the protests in Tripoli had developed “a Sunni character par excellence” and had come to contribute to whipping up sectarian discord due to some protesters’ chanting of “sectarian slogans” directed at “the Shi’ites, the Alawites, and Hezbollah.”

As the Tripoli protests were caught in a larger web of intrigue and competing interests, the city’s image as a “mailbox,” through which messages in the form of staged events are exchanged between regional and national actors, was reinforced. The “mailbox” label for Tripoli gained currency among local analysts and politicians during the on-again, off-again armed clashes between the predominantly Alawite Jabal Muhsin and Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh between 2007 and 2014. At the time, the “mailbox” metaphor was used to convey the idea that much of the clashes between the Sunnis and Alawites were largely planned, coordinated and/or instigated by national or external actors to exchange political messages or settle scores with each other. By the same token, several interviewees I spoke to while conducting the research for this paper (Anonymous Writer 2021, Salih 2021, Sha’aban 2021) deployed the “mailbox” metaphor as an associative device to link twists and turns in the protest movement in Tripoli to intra-elite rivalries and the designs of external and national actors.

Nowhere is this “mailbox” metaphor more apt than in the bout of protests that swept through the streets of Tripoli in late January 2021. While the protesters’ anger at the biting economic effects of the strict coronavirus lockdown restrictions and the escalating bout of inflation and depreciation of the
Lebanese pound cannot be discounted, the fuller picture is far more complicated and nuanced and casts doubt on the outwardly spontaneous nature of the protests. In addition to economic woes, this bout of protests was fueled, if not sparked, by petty rivalries among the venal and corrupt Lebanese political elite. Tellingly, as these protests were raging in Tripoli, 16 groups involved in organizing protests throughout Lebanon issued a statement which, while underscoring the “legitimacy” of the protests, decried the “exploitation of the protests and the infiltration of saboteurs and instigators of riots” (Lebanon 24 2021).

In late 2020, Commander-in-Chief of the Army General Joseph Aoun, who is widely believed to be the US’s favorite candidate to succeed incumbent President Michel Aoun, reshuffled top commanders in a routine shakeup to bring new faces to key security positions. As part of this shakeup, which unfolded amid intense intra-elite wrangling over top security posts, the Lebanese Army Command, in early December 2020, announced a reshuffle in the top brass of its Intelligence Directorate, which included the replacement of provincial chiefs of Army Intelligence. Interestingly, the new chief of the Army Intelligence’s North Branch, Colonel Nazih al-Biqa’î, was the only new top intelligence commander appointed in acting capacity. This has been widely attributed to objections to Biqa’î’s appointment raised by Sa’ad al-Hariri, who had been pushing for the appointment of another intelligence officer serving in the North to the post (al-Akhbar 2020, December 1 and 3). Other Hariri supporters and loyalists caught in the reshuffle were also removed from positions of influence in the security services in the North (Anonymous Writer 2021, Nashshabeh 2021). According to the Tripolitan writer who spoke to me on condition of strict anonymity:

Those who were removed were generally from Sa’ad’s group and used to benefit financially from the port and from their relationships with some merchants and wealthy people. Sa’ad’s people want[ed] to send a message saying that they can control the situation on the ground and thus, when they were replaced by others, they unleashed and let the hooligans loose (Anonymous Writer 2021).

Accordingly, the January 2021 protests in Tripoli underscored the transmogrification of the wave of protests in the northern Lebanese port city since October 2019. The protests underwent an ominous shift from a promising reformist and transformational social movement embracing a wider spectrum of the city’s population to a narrow, erratic protest movement devoid of revolutionary potential and infiltrated by agitators and agents provocateurs in the service
of members of the country’s kleptocracy. As the protests went through this intense arc, much of the early moral high ground on which they had rested was frittered away.

Conclusion

This study sought to explain the fall out of grace of the protest movement in the Lebanese coastal city of Tripoli which started in 2019. In analyzing the trajectory of the movement, drawing on media accounts and interviews with participants in the protests, the study showed how the movement was infiltrated and captured by members of the Lebanese kleptocracy who diverted it to serve their own goals and interests. It also showed the intractability of sectarian divisions in Lebanon which constricted cross-sectarian mobilization in the protest movement in Tripoli. The early outburst of unalloyed exuberance and cross-sectarian solidarity could not be sustained in the teeth of heightened sectarian tensions and, eventually, the movement became embroiled in the Lebanese sectarian and political tug-of-war. As Bello (2019, p. 145) pertinently observed:

[C]ounterrevolutionary movements target certain groups as the disruptors of order or the corrupters of social purity, the favourites being minorities in the case of the majoritarian counterrevolution and communists or “corrupt populists” in that of the class-based counterrevolution. In some cases, the targeted class is seen as more than a scapegoat and is ideologically classified as vermin stripped of all humanity and deserving of elimination or systematic repression.

This reminds us of Dankwart Rustow’s (1970) argument that national unity is a fundamental precondition of a successful democratization process. An upshot of this argument is that in societies divided along sectarian lines political mobilization is likely to inflame, reinforce and harden sectarian solidarities and cleavages. As Valbjørn and Hinnebusch (2019) observe, in the absence of national unity “political mobilization would likely take place along ethnic,

3 I have in mind Herbert Blumer’s (1953, p. 199) classic definition of social movements as “collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living.”
tribal or sectarian lines and the democratization process might not only fail but even lead to violent conflict and civil war.” This directs attention to the heterogeneity of the outcomes of democratic transitions, including backsliding towards old patterns of politics, which has long been identified in the literature on democratization in the post-communist countries (Obydenkova 2012).

By adopting a strategy that combines clientelism and identity politics, the Lebanese kleptocracy has been able to bounce back, resisting challenges to its authority and legitimacy and the global trend toward democratization and clean politics. This paper helps reveal the corrosive effect of this strategy on the protest movement. Access to financial resources, including outside support, well-developed political and media organizations, deeply entrenched sectarian political culture, and skillful co-optation of sections of civil society and the opposition, enabled the kleptocracy not only to withstand the challenges posed by the protests but also to ride the wave of anti-government sentiments and frustrations to the extent that they used the protests to push their agendas. This is a theme that resonates in the parts of the literature that focused on the resilience of Arab authoritarianism (Anderson 2001, Bellin 2004, Bellin 2012, Diamond 2010, Harik 2006, Masoud 2015).

However, while the protests have not resulted in deep transformations in the underlying political structure in Lebanon, the wave of protests unleashed by the October Revolution has posed a serious challenge to the corrupt and nepotistic sectarian political and business oligarchy. Lebanese youth are more mobilized than ever before. The new levels of mobilization and political engagement and willingness to challenge the status quo are likely to feed into the seething public anger and frustration as the economy continues to sink into the mire. It remains to be seen how the economic collapse and the transformation of a thriving economy into a dysfunctional system spawning poverty, unemployment and inequality could be reversed and reformed. Many educated and professional Lebanese have already migrated, creating a profuse bleeding of brain power that could stunt any real attempts at the needed profound reform of the system. The dangers of a political bankruptcy on top of a severe economic crisis loom on the immediate horizons, thus removing any political levers that had prevented total collapse in the past. However, if the recent episodes of protest in Tripoli are any guide, future outbursts of public contention, if and when they occur, are likely to get bogged down in the same vicious cycle of counterrevolution bred by internal power struggles and rivalry over influence among competing regional powerhouses. The protest movement in Tripoli coalesced quickly around an anti-establishment agenda. But elite infiltration drowned the movement’s revolutionary and reformist
impulse, contributing to a growing, dreary, gloomy and grinding feeling among Tripolitans, and the Lebanese at large, that things are never going to improve.

Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

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