

Lebanon in revolt: interview with Sharif Abdunnur

Sharif Abdunnur¹ and Torgeir Fjeld²

Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art,
philosophy and psycho-analysis –
<https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/>

Copyright © 2020 Abdunnur and
Fjeld.

Correspondence: *Inscriptions*, e:
inscriptions@tankebanen.no.

Received: 31 December 2019.

Accepted: 31 December 2019.

Published: 1 January 2020.

How to cite: Abdunnur, Sharif, and
Torgeir Fjeld. “Lebanon in revolt:
interview with Sharif Abdunnur.”
Inscriptions 3, no. 1 (January-
2020): 57.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Since October last year Lebanon has seen nation-wide protests against deteriorating standards of living, dubious governance, and a collapsing economy.³ Sharif Abdunnur, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Balamand in Beirut and Editor of *Inscriptions* has experienced the tumultuous events first hand, and in some cases ended up in the middle of an escalating conflict between armed sectarian forces and revolting civilians. In this interview, conducted on New Years Eve last year, Abdunnur gives his version of the events, explains their social and political context, and connects them to historical and international forces at work in Lebanon’s volatile present.

The revolts were triggered by the announcement of new taxes, among them a monthly levy on social media use, in mid-October. Barring occasional eruptions of violence, the protests have been largely peaceful, as demonstrators have been able to form ties across religious and social lines to create a new, civilian impetus for a government devoid of sectarian divisions. Attempts to pacify the demonstrators by offering carefully worded concessions were not sufficient to hinder the collapse of Saad al-Hariri’s government. Last month President Michel Aoun announced that Hassan Diab would take over from al-Hariri. Diab is closely linked to the Iran-backed Hezbollah, and his selection could mean that ties with former foreign allies, such as the US, will cool off. Lebanon’s currency is pegged to the American dollar.⁴

These protests come on the heels of two recent waves of revolt in this small Mediterranean country. In 2005, after 15 years on Lebanese soil Syrian forces withdrew from the country following large-scale demonstrations. This so-called Cedar revolution was succeeded by the Arab Spring in 2011 when citizens in many countries, such as Tunisia, Yemen, and Bahrain, protested against deteriorating living

standards and ineffective government. While the consequences were grave and sometimes alarming in countries such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, protests didn’t achieve the same effects in Lebanon.

How is the situation in Lebanon now?

The situation is pretty bad. Many places we see demonstrations, there is resistance, and in some places, such as Tripoli, even starvation. Those who want to move aren’t able to do so. At the root of all this is a collapsing economy.

People cannot draw money from their own accounts, and the banks have become sites of fighting. Even those who have money transferred from abroad cannot access their funds. Every bank has armed guards, as there have been fights there every day. While the economy hasn’t done well, part of the problem has been that the banking system has been very much in line with the government. Together they have run

¹University of Balamand, Lebanon.

²Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts.

³For a recent report in the international media on the situation, see Associated Press, “Lebanon protests: 40 injured as violence flares again in Beirut,” *The Guardian Online*, December 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/15/lebanon-protests-40-injured-as-violence-flares-again-in-beirut>.

⁴Tom Arnold, “Can Lebanon’s newly designated PM save the economy?” *Reuters Online*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-economy-explainer-idUSKBN1YO1GW>.

the economy in an extremely corrupt way.

What are the chief demands of the demonstrators?

Lebanon has enshrined a political system that divides the country along sectarian lines. The demonstrators have urged a radical change to this system, replacing it with a framework that is based more on competence and qualifications. However, at this stage nothing is being done to rectify the situation. Either politicians ignore the situation completely, or they partly acknowledge it, and promise that it will get better, but are unwilling or unable to enact meaningful change.

How is resistance organised?

What we have here is not just a class struggle, but a resistance to the sectarian divide that is still prevalent in the governance of this country. The revolt has been targeting a political system that isn't working, so that what we have is essentially a class-based and a religious struggle coming together.

Is there any formal structure to the resistance?

No, this is largely a spontaneous movement. The problem with organising resistance as a formal structure is that with such formalisation religious divisions come back in. It is the spontaneity that has given the resistance its strength. However, it is also its weakness, since the lack of organisation means that there hasn't been a structure to create real change.

Demonstrations have been organised through chat groups and social media, not dissimilar to what we saw during the Arab Spring.⁵ Typically the regular media has all been pro-government, so that crucial information and communication has taken place through social media.

Are civil liberties and academic freedoms safeguarded in this situation?

Officially, yes. However, we have also seen quite contradictory statements from officials, such as from the Chief of Police, who declared that the rights of demonstrators could not interfere with the rights of others, in effect making it an offence to occupy thoroughfares and bridges.

When it comes to academic freedom we are very much in a state of uncertainty. I was one of the first professors here to take a stand, even before the institution I work for. Now the situation has gone from bad to worse, and the universities are increasingly looking at their purse. Since the US dollar is drained out of the economy⁶ universities are left sitting on the fence. The reality is that we expect the situation to get much worse in the new year. We see students dropping courses, and we forecast that many of them will not be able to take on a full course load in the coming semesters. What we have seen is that 50 to 70 per cent of our students are unable to pay their tuition, and we know that some private schools may be closing for the same reason during the coming year.

How is it to teach under these conditions?

It is super challenging: it is difficult to get students to focus on the material when there are so many distractions. The lecturers who have been able to shape their curricula, assignments, and tests to keep up with current events have to a greater extent been able to maintain student interest.

However, this is a situation in which everything becomes real: everything we have studied becomes visible. I gave several lectures on the streets and highways during the protests. At some points were exposed to tear gas, and we experienced quite a few stand-offs with the police, pushing and shoving, and so on. It is a very chaotic situation out there, and at one point we were attacked by a group of armed civilians. The police were standing by, watching the situation, but not interfering when these thugs assaulted us. I still have bruises and a swelling on the head from the fracas. We don't know who attacked us. They were dressed in civilian clothing, and did not identify themselves in any way; however, we believe that they were an anonymous group allied with government forces.

⁵The Arab Spring was a series of revolts and revolutions directed against oppressive regimes and deteriorating standards of living in countries like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and also Lebanon, in 2011 and 2012.

⁶The government imposed "unofficial capital controls" in November last year, restricting withdrawals from accounts denominated in foreign currency to \$1000 a week (see Dana Khraiche, "Lebanon's Banks Set Limits They Won't Call Capital Controls," *Bloomberg Online*, November 17, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-17/lebanese-banks-to-impose-first-joint-measures-in-face-of-crisis>). The limit has since been reduced to \$200 per week.

How has all this affected your own research?

Well, it has been impossible to continue writing on projects I had planned out before the demonstrations started. At the moment we are in a highly emotionally charged situation, but with some distance I also see many interesting elements in our present formation. For instance, Lebanon comes from a past where politicians were more or less deified; they were treated as gods, one couldn't utter their names, and so on. Now, during the demonstrations this kind of veneration has come to an end: politicians have become subjects of video clips in social media, cartoons, graffiti, etc. These popular expressions have given beautiful depictions of a corrupted governing class.

The international media reports that the new prime minister is more closely aligned to Iran, and consequently less connected to American interests. How do you see the future?

The situation is very chaotic, and the tensions ignite anxiety and even paranoia. If the situation was left to internal forces the movement would in time take over, but what we know from past experience is that these revolts often get hijacked from abroad. What we see here is a government that is increasingly acting like an Iranian satellite, while the country is heading for an economic disaster with no currency available for even the most immediate necessities. The consequence is a situation where we don't know where we're going; there is no clear path forward.

I don't see anything good happening within a year at least. This revolution needs to find its leader, and even then it will take a long time for real change to take place.

You are using the term "revolution"?

Well, yes, the term is problematic. It depends on what side of the fence you stand. The ruling powers have referred to these events as "disobedience." However, the demand from the demonstrators has been a complete overthrow of the religious political structure that has destroyed the country, and in that sense it is a revolutionary movement.

The demonstrations have nevertheless been pretty peaceful compared to, say, Iraq or Ukraine, so I would say that what we have seen is the *beginning* of a revolution. In that sense this is quite different from what we saw during the Arab Spring. There are 18 religious sects in Lebanon, and a lot of subdivisions. The demonstrators have sought to abandon the old hierarchy and prepare the ground for a more civilian government, but this has proved difficult so far. In that sense this movement has been less powerful than other revolutions.

Some demonstrators have claimed the revolt as the beginning of a nation building process. Do you agree with that assessment?

I would say that everything is open in these protests, but the central demand has been that we cannot have one religious composition dominate other interests. That kind of dispensation has been a disaster for this country.

What we see is perhaps a new Lebanese civility, one that is not religious. For the first time we discuss government and nation, what is good and what is bad, and not in terms of what parts of government belong to which religious groups.

I have travelled all around the country to discuss these questions with people from very different backgrounds. We are reaching areas that are only now welcoming us and opening up to these questions. These are groups that are ready to communicate; and in this sense what we are experiencing is definitely nation-building. You could perhaps say that we are now seeing the first roots, the beginning of a Lebanese nation.

References

- Arnold, Tom. "Can Lebanon's newly designated PM save the economy?" *Reuters Online*, December 20, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-economy-explainer-idUSKBN1YO1GW>.
 Associated Press. "Lebanon protests: 40 injured as violence flares again in Beirut." *The Guardian Online*, December 15, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/15/lebanon-protests-40-injured-as-violence-flares-again-in-beirut>.
 Khraiche, Dana. "Lebanon's Banks Set Limits They Won't Call Capital Controls." *Bloomberg Online*, November 17, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-17/lebanese-banks-to-impose-first-joint-measures-in-face-of-crisis>.