BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION WILL FAIL TO MAKE POLITICAL CHANGES

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Beirut Port Explosion Will Fail to Make Political Changes

The massive industrial explosion at the port of Beirut, which resulted in the deaths of over 150 people (and counting), injured some 5000 others and destroyed the port and surrounding neighborhoods, is likely to result in a new wave of demonstrations in the coming weeks aimed at the already unpopular government and likely the Hizbollah organization.

The massive blast comes as Lebanon is struggling with the Covid-19 global pandemic and its worst financial crisis in its history caused by government corruption and excessive irresponsible borrowing. Inflation has caused the Lebanese pound to collapse and prices of basic food to skyrocket. Nearly half of the nation's population now live below poverty line and unemployment is at 33%.

Though a full investigation is underway, there have been calls, including by local politicians, to allow for an international investigation due to fear of cover up and deep public mistrust in the government, which is widely perceived as a puppet of President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement party and his Hizbollah allies.

Shortly after the explosion President Michel Aoun, Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi and the head of the Internal Security Services, Abbas Ibrahim, stated that the blast was caused by the explosion of some 2750 tons of highly explosive ammonium nitrate, seized years ago and stored unsafely. A day later and amid growing anti-government anger on social media, President Aoun added "that the cause has not been determined yet and there is a possibility of external interference through a rocket or bomb or other act". The statement is likely to further anger the populace as the president's zig zagging is viewed as another attempt to shelter the shaky government.

As the loss of life and the destruction associated with the blast, estimated at over US$15 billion, the public anger is likely to manifest as mass protests over what is widely seen as government negligence. The early indicators of the looming unrest took place the morning after the explosion when small groups of demonstrators pelted the motorcade of former Prime Minister Saad el-Hariri as he went to visit the site of the explosion. Isolated reports of clashes between protesters and security forces near the blast site. Later at night security personnel deployed tear gas at protesters at the city's downtown Martyrs' Square, after a number of protesters attempted to storm the parliament building.

Despite the Coronavirus pandemic and a two-week state of emergency that went into effect on August 5, anti-government activists called on the public to participate in a large-scale protest called for the evening of August 8. While a mass protest could revive the protest movement that erupted in mid-October 2019. However, based on previous mass protests and despite popular anger, a national sustained movement is unlikely to materialize.

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While in almost any civilized nation, the government would collectively resign following such a negligence based industrial disaster, it took the Lebanese government nearly a week and massive protests--the largest since October 2019, to do so.

Despite growing calls for electoral reforms, the Lebanese, which are trenched in their sectarian lines since the civil war, will continue to elect their officials and politicians according to their religious and ideological affiliations effectively ensuring that future governments will continue to oblige their sectarian groups rather than the entire public welfare.

Based on previous disasters caused by failures of former governments, including the 2015 deadly garbage crisis, the 2019 environmental crisis and power outages crisis earlier this year (that lasted up to 20 hours a day), it is very unlikely that the same political players will be able to make a real change other than make empty statements and promises to their constituents.

Though much of the anger was directed at the government, as the country picks itself up and fully assesses the situation, Hizbollah may find itself facing criticism over its practice of storing weapons and explosive materials in civilian areas. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the powerful Shi'ite organization – and Lebanon's strongman--denied what he said were "preconceived" claims both domestically and internationally that organization had arms stored at the port. As the organization military wing is better equipped and trained than the Lebanese military, there is no force in the country that will be able to disarm the militant organization or stop its political dominance.

While in almost any civilized nation, the government would collectively resign following such a negligence the Lebanese government, which is no stranger to disasters caused by its public services failures, is unlikely to do so.

Soundbite analytics

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