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STRATEGIC TRENDS

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LEVANT

Stinking politics

For over a month now several thousand Lebanese, mostly young people, have taken the streets to protest against the most severe garbage crisis ever happened in Lebanon. The crisis began in July when the closure of the Naameh landfill caused rubbish to pile up on Beirut's roadsides, in parking lots and river beds.

Soon after, with the first protest being on August 23rd, people organized in the “You Stink” movement, emerged as a framework to demand a solution to trash collection but quickly broadening its target to the entire political class, accused of being corrupt and inept. As a background note, Lebanon’s last legislative elections were held in 2009, and parliament has twice extended its own mandate, citing internal political divisions and regional instability as justification. Lebanon has been without a President for 20 months now.

The Lebanese political elite quickly panicked. Government officials positions’ have swing from full support and attempts at co-optation to outright denunciation of “conspiracies by foreign entities”. Meanwhile security forces are taking confused and conflicting actions to react to the movement. Soon after the protests begun, they built a wall to protect the Government Palace only to take it down less than

24 hours later. Customary police state response included the use of violence, tear gas, live and rubber bullets, water cannons, random and targeted arrests, and the mass deployment of the army and police. Some demonstrators have been threatened, more than 100 people have been arrested while 22 others have been charged with a variety of ad hoc charges.

Meanwhile, on September 9, Lebanon's cabinet approved a proposal by the Minister of Agriculture Akram Chehayeb calling for the temporary reopening of Naameh and the construction of two additional landfills. However, activists in Naameh argue they will not allow any additional rubbish to come to their town and civil society organizations from other cities in Lebanon opposed the building of new landfills. The worst of it all is that, even if an agreement was reached on a new waste management plan, protests seem unstoppable because they are not confined to this issue anymore. There are indeed calls for the resignations of the Minister of Interior Nohad Machnouk, Minister of Environment Mohammad Machnouk and Prime Minister Tamam Salam. Protestors are also demanding for inquiries into corruption, new elections and new electoral laws. Some want to get rid of the entire sectarian political system in Lebanon, some others angrily protest against socio-economic inequality.

Though it seems much too premature to label these protests as identical to movements of 2011 (Arab Revolutions or Arab Springs), few common issues stand out. The YouStink movement tries to be non-sectarian and independent from all political parties, and on the one hand it is infused with rebellious nationalist sentiments. On the other hand, its discourse remains elitist and despised by many leftist parties and by the working class.

To sum up, the movement, despite being but a pocket of resistance against the establishment so far, should be credited for opening a new space that allows a political imagination that could significantly alter the political system in Lebanon. Given the weakness shown so far by the governmental and security bodies to manage popular grievances and demands, the movement does have a chance to push through. Due to Lebanon's peculiarities, inclusiveness will be the key factor determining the success or failure of it.