The challenges of regaining trust

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 Lebanon's mass revolt against corruption, poverty and the absence of state presence is the country's largest uprising since the Cedar Revolution of 2005. Demonstrators took the streets of many city centers across the country to protest against corruption and unachieved reforms. The Lebanese stood firm in large peaceful gatherings that overcome all sectarian and social borders. Observers say one of the outstanding features of these protests is how demonstrators have shaken off the sectarian splits to connect in collective grievances.

Protests are about governance failures and economic grievances. Stressing on their national identity as Lebanese, people are rebelling against a weak government unable to deliver essential services. People are asking for reform and condemning pollution, extra taxes, stealing, social alienation, political marginalization, lack of job opportunities, crumbling infrastructure including daily electricity cuts, trash piles and limited water supplies. Protesters say they have had enough of crippling nepotism.

From the first day of the protests the call is for building a "strong state" to turn its focus to wider grievances with the governance system, which is blamed for corruption and misconduct.

What does a strong state mean? The methods of identifying what a strong state is has been debated globally for many decades. And still, the call for a strong state may have a different meaning for different reformers. However, in a clear direction, the calls for building a "strong state" implicitly assume the perception that the state is weak.

There are different approaches to understanding the state: the state as a legal idea, the state as a set of rules and institutions, the state as a system of values or the state as a network of interactions.

It might mean "strong public institutions," "public-private partnerships," "institutional coordination" or a "visible hand" of government in the economy growth that insures prosperity.

However, an essential enquiry is about the underlying perceptions of a term such as "strong state" among the Lebanese protesters.

There are many new features in this demonstration that should be studied and thought about.

Experts need to answer how this popular demand for state-building can fulfill many of the protesters' requests.

One of the key focus areas in the process of state-building is the development of the culture of the state and understanding the dialectic of the relationship between the state and the citizens.

Thus, what are the dynamics of a citizen-state relationship which impact individuals' decisions to engage in such protests? What are the key strategic approaches that state institutions need to take into consideration in the process of strengthening their ties with citizens? These are the questions that need to be answered.

The state is the source of security for individuals and groups. This feeling by the citizen that he/she does not need another source to provide this security is an important step toward building states.

Competition between loyalty to the state on the one hand, and sub-loyalties to political parties in a sectarian regime on the other, is a challenge that is important to look closely into.

The state is a focus of loyalty and belonging; it is the source of symbols and collective values that give the terms citizenship, homeland and patriotism its meanings. It gives the citizens a feeling of "integration" in the national community, and "identification" with a level of belonging that defeats the needs of another affiliation. The impact of a culture of loyalty to the state on social cohesion and national integration is countless. Achieving justice between classes and social strata, fair policies and equitable distribution of resources and services are among the functions of the state in its role to achieve social equity and cohesion.

The issue of trust between the citizens and the state is critical for the current and the following phase. Regaining and increasing trust within the Lebanese society should be a strategic priority.

The state should encourage every attempt aimed at promoting and building trust, stressing its subsequent effects on social peace and prosperity. "Trust is gained, not requested" as Prime Minister Saad Hariri said during his statement after the Cabinet session two days ago.

Building on the generated and revived sense of national belonging by the Lebanese 2019 demonstration is a golden opportunity to incubate a national culture of the state as the guarantor of identity, citizenship and national belonging.

We are witnessing a moment when political war of attrition delayed reforms, but this war fired back with the demands of the public that reform is not an elitist discussion but a national-will and social demand. Serious and fast reform in the socio-economic and political dynamics were prerequisites for growth and international support and now they are essential for social peace and conflict prevention.

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