

Declaration of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches in Lebanon

We, the heads of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant (Evangelical) Churches in Lebanon, as well as the heads of all male and female Monastic Orders, have gathered today at the Maronite Patriarchate in Bkirki to consider the present national situation and crisis.

This is a crisis that requires us to carefully monitor its developments, nay its transformations, to prevent the country from sliding into a dangerous track that could threaten the essence and identity of Lebanese existence.

At the outset, we affirm to our people that the Church has always stood by them and embraced their needs through its educational, health-related, and social institutions and services. We hereby affirm our continued commitment to offering this ministry and services.

Since October 17, Lebanon has been witnessing a historic and exceptional popular uprising that calls upon us to make a historic stand and take exceptional measures.

“Tranquilizers” are no longer useful. The people would not have arisen had their pain not become unbearable. And although the pain turned into a loud outcry during the past days, however, it has been going on for years without proper treatment or serious attention on the part of the government. Indeed the Lebanese State persisted in its deviation, stubbornness, and corruption until people had no choice but to rebel. This explosive reality forced all of us spiritual leaders to pay attention and to act immediately to address it.

We who are gathered here salute the uprising people and express our appreciation and solidarity with their civilized and peaceful movement. We also fully understand its motives.

Indeed the people have shown themselves to be more united than their leaders have been and have given ample evidence of their desire for a “*united national life*” in a time of disintegration and strife. During these days, the people of Lebanon embodied love and partnership; they strengthened their sense of dignity and exhibited a deep yearning for freedom. Our people held fast to their national and social rights; they also sent a message that transcends denominational and sectarian divisions. They took to the squares and streets of our towns and cities and called for the establishment of a “civil state” -- an idea originally anchored in the Lebanese Constitution itself. They called for “civil society,” having been inspired by its spiritual values that long characterized Lebanon's history.

Therefore, we have gathered here to call for embracing and protecting the legitimate uprising of our sons and daughters, young and old, and to press upon our government and rulers to respond to the people’s demands. Among these demands are: ***democratic governance, credible administration, independent and just judiciary, transparent government performance, impartiality in conflict situations, implementing administrative decentralization, extending the authority of the government forces alone over all Lebanese territory, combating corruption, ending financial waste, recovering plundered moneys through effective legislation, securing education and employment opportunities for all, and finally, providing social amenities to the different sectors of the population.*** These we

consider to be the most basic rights of the Lebanese people – still not fully established -- a hundred years since the birth of their nation-state.

As spiritual leaders, we have long warned the authorities about what is occurring today. However, this government and all the successive governments for the last 30 years have continuously ignored our appeals, and thus neglected their prime duties. Today the people feel that their nation has been turned into small “fiefdoms” in which private interests and personal gains have the upper hand. They see that little consideration has been given to citizens’ equality and rights. Instead, self-interest and self-gain have dominated political life at the expense of social welfare. This is why today, *oppression* has degenerated into an *uprising*.

The government has reacted only under the pressure of the street. A list of reforms was recently declared by the Council of Ministers. In particular, we mention the approval of the 2020 budget, which is a positive first step. However, the present situation is much more serious. It requires additionally an amendment of the ministerial team itself and a renewal of the administrative staff. The government, if it is to appear credible, must employ persons with competence, credibility, integrity, and patriotism. More urgently, these reforms need to be *quickly implemented* so that the people on the streets will take these recent decisions by the government seriously. Sadly, people have lost confidence in the government and its promises.

Amid these historical events which the world is following (with mixed motives!), we launch the following appeal to the *local authorities*, the *local people*, and the *international community*:

First:

To the local authorities, we say: Beware of the magnitude of the current events and their grave impact on the future image of Lebanon, and more especially, on its future status, identity, and economy. The government must not treat this uprising as a passing and transient event, but as a phenomenon of social and national transformation. We call on the government to undertake serious, radical, and courageous steps to pull the country out of this major crisis. We call on it to transform the behavior of governors, rulers, and administrators, ensuring that they become good, fair and impartial. We also call upon it to engage with the living forces of society:..“Shame on a government or a State that fears its people and its elites!”

We also call upon His Excellency the President of the Republic, who is entrusted with safeguarding the Constitution and is the overseer of the performance of government institutions, to immediately begin consultations with political and religious community leaders to properly respond to the demands of the people. The continued paralysis of public life in the country could lead to the collapse of Lebanon economically and financially. This will have a detrimental effect on the Lebanese people, especially on our rebelling sons and daughters. It is high time for the State to respond properly to the legitimate demands of its people in order for normalcy to return to the country.

Second:

To the Lebanese people of the uprising (in Lebanon and abroad) we say: Preserve the purity and peacefulness of your movement and prevent any party from exploiting its outcry, thus transforming it into a “coup” against the State as such. This will inevitably destroy Lebanon’s democracy.

A week has passed since this continuous popular uprising began – an uprising that has clearly shown the deep respect of the Lebanese people for the basic *freedom of expression*. But it is also necessary to respect the *freedom of movement* of the citizens of Lebanon so that they may be able to have access to their basic needs, especially those related to health, education, and securing the normal economic necessities of life. This way, public opinion will continue to support the uprising.

In this context, we call upon the demonstrators to designate from their midst certain persons as interlocutors with the concerned authorities to reach effective solutions. At the same time, we appreciate the efforts of the Lebanese Army and the various Security Forces who have embraced and protected this movement. We call upon all parties to cooperate with these Forces and abide by the security measures they take.

Third:

To the International Community we say: Do not abandon your role in supporting the first democracy that emerged in the Middle East, and to preserve the first experiment of Christian / Muslim partnership and coexistence that emerged since World War I. We call upon you to help Lebanon solve the problems resulting from the wars of the countries of the region, and to strictly implement all international resolutions. The uprising of the Lebanese people today is but an additional proof to the world that the people of Lebanon deserve a free and democratic life, in a sovereign, independent, stable and prosperous State

We also call upon the world community, both regional and international, near and far, to support the Lebanese people and government to remain a beacon of light and freedom in this East, and to fulfill its calling to be a “*Nation/Message of co-living among various religious communities,*” as the late Pope, St. John Paul II, phrased it.

Our beloved sons and daughters of the uprising ... we understand your movement and hear your cry. We support your demands, and will not accept that they are lost. Therefore, we assure you that your uprising will remain alive in our hearts until it achieves its purpose of real reform. What you have achieved thus far is more than an uprising – it is, in fact, a “*renaissance of the nation of Lebanon.*”

In conclusion, we lift up our prayers to God asking Him to bless our people and to give us all the gift of listening to each other, and to allow for a constructive dialogue, done with realism, humility and openness, so that we all work for the glory of God and the good of our homeland Lebanon.

Bkirki

October 23, 2019