

Lebanon is sinking

by GWYNNE DYER

Off the Lebanese coast about 60 km north of Beirut a 104-metre (340-foot) battleship stands vertically, with her bow and some 30 metres of her length plunged into the mud. The seabed is 140 metres down, but you can even scuba-dive on the stern if you are a technical diver. The ship is a bit like Lebanon, for reasons I'll explain later.

Five years ago Lebanon still looked like a middle-class country with a lot of poor people. Now it looks like a very poor country with a few rich people. If you want the numbers, the proportion of people living below the official poverty line has gone from 30% two years ago to 80% now.

Indeed, even the civil war of 1975-1990 did less damage to the economy, though it destroyed several hundred thousand lives and much of the country's infrastructure. 'Even during the civil war there was money and nobody starved,' as a Beirut bus driver put it.

The current disaster's roots are in that war. It drove the Lebanese back into the relative safety of their own sectarian communities, Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim, and warlords arose to protect those communities.

Some of the warlords were prosperous traditional leaders, other were men made powerful by the war. To finance the militias they led, they created 'taxation' systems that were little short of extortion, and it was their relatives and friends who organised and ran those systems.

By the end of the war in 1990 they were the new political and financial elite, with well-paid militias to enforce their will on their own communities and they didn't go back to their day jobs. They became a corrupt and nepotistic club whose members always cooperate to appropriate the wealth of the Lebanese state, however much they may hate each other.

That system worked smoothly in the 1990s and the 2000s, but it was visibly coming apart by the 2010s. There simply wasn't enough money to share out among the elites (politely known as the 'political class'). Lebanon produces almost nothing, not even enough food for its own people, and its imports are paid for with remittances, foreign aid, and loans.

With not enough money coming in to sustain their immense patronage networks, the elites started taxing the poorer section of the population more heavily, and in 2019 something snapped. Suddenly Beirut's streets were full of protesters demanding fundamental change.

Lebanon is a former French colony, so French President Emmanuel Macron flew in and offered the Lebanese government £11 billion in return for structural reforms that would root out the corruption at the heart of government. But the elites who benefit from that system ARE the government, in practice, so of course they said no, thanks.

The demos continued for almost a year, for by now there were long daily cuts in electricity. Impoverished families were finding it hard to afford enough food and annual inflation is now 138% and malnutrition was widespread.

Then came the massive explosion in Beirut's port district last year. That got the International Monetary Fund involved, offering Lebanon huge loans if the corrupt system is reformed, but it's likely that the government will turn that offer away too. If stubborn selfishness was an Olympic event, the Lebanese political class would win gold.

It's getting close to the edge. Last Thursday Hezbollah staged a mass protest in Beirut, demanding the removal of the judge presiding over the inquiry into who was responsible for importing the 2,750 tonnes of fertiliser that caused last year's port blast. (Hezbollah is one leading candidate for the blame.)

When the march entered a Christian district at least one sniper opened up on it. Seven Shias died, and the crowd (some of whom were armed) tried to storm Christian neighbourhoods in retaliation. And still the Lebanese political class refuses to bend.

So why does that political class resemble the captain of HMS Victoria, the defunct battleship that did a nose-dive in 1893? Because the officer commanding the British Mediterranean Fleet, Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon, was one of the most stubborn men in history.

He ordered a very complex manoeuvre in which two parallel lines of battleships would make simultaneous U-turns TOWARDS each other, winding up going in the opposite direction but with the parallel lines much closer together. And he got the distance wrong.

Everybody else on the bridge could see the ships were actually going to collide, and several of them spoke to Tryon about it, but he ignored their advice. The ship that was going to ram him also queried his orders, but he persevered. So they collided, and the admiral went down with his ship.

Think of Lebanon's political class as Admiral Tryon, and the country as HMS Lebanon. Technical divers only.