

**Address by His Excellency the President of the Lebanese Republic General Michel Aoun on the eve of Lebanon's 76<sup>th</sup> Independence Day**

**Baabda, 21/11/2019**

**My fellow Lebanese ladies and gentlemen,**

As I address you on the eve of Lebanon's 76<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, I am well aware that this is no time for speeches, literature and celebrations.

It's time for action, serious and relentless action, because we are in a race against time, for challenges are tremendous and dangerous, and we have already lost a lot of time.

The new government that Lebanon awaits and around which hopes are placed was supposed to see the light and embark on its work, but the contradictions that govern the Lebanese politics imposed carefulness in view of avoiding dangers and coming up with a government that would live up to your ambitions and aspirations as much as possible, and would be highly efficient, productive and orderly, because the challenges ahead are huge and the deadlines imminent.

**My fellow Lebanese,**

Seventy-six years have gone by since Lebanon became an independent nation. Throughout these years, the country went through rough periods during which its independence was jeopardized; and with every passing crisis, we become all the more aware that it is harder to preserve independence than to earn it.

Indeed, independence means a free and independent national decision, away from to any form of custody, whether explicit or masked, and this is what we hold on to, today and every day, with all our resolve and strength, and at all costs.

The deals and settlements that are being devised for our region, and the attempts to impose them, not only threaten the independence of the concerned States, but also their being and very existence.

Therefore, affirming Lebanon's independence neither implies hostility towards any State nor enmity towards anyone. On the contrary, we seek sincere friendship and positive approach to those who befriend us, but on the basis of our free decision, a peer-to-peer relationship, the acceptance of suggestions that suit our nation and the rejection of those

that harm it; and if “politics is the art of the possible”, it is also the rejection of the unacceptable.

International settlements do not pose the sole threat on the stability of the State; on the Lebanese internal arena, there is a looming danger that threatens our society, institutions and economy: corruption.

Fighting corruption has become a tagline, used every time there is a need for it, even by those who are steeped in corruption. Yet, upon the adoption of the slightest execution procedures, confessional and sectarian red lights begin to surface.

The battle here is tough, rather one of the toughest. I therefore turned to you, fellow Lebanese, asking for help, because no one else can make all lines available, and no one else can exert pressure for the implementation of existing laws and adoption of the needed legislation to recover the looted funds and pursue the corrupt.

Here I reiterate my call to the demonstrators to learn first-hand their effective demands and the means to enforce them, because dialogue is the sole correct path to the resolution of crises.

The popular movements that have taken place lately have broken some established taboos, toppled the untouchables to a certain extent, prompted the judiciary to act, and stimulated the legislative branch to give priority to a set of anti-corruption bills.

It is healthy and useful to shed the light on corruption hotbeds through the media and on the streets, and so is the submission of available incriminating information and documents to the judiciary. Nevertheless, what undermines the most the anti-corruption track is when the media, the streets and the political debate become the plaintiff, the general prosecutor, the judge and the jailer at the same time; because sending out random accusations, issuing final judgments and generalizing may criminalize an innocent, but it certainly allows the real perpetrators to remain anonymous, go unpunished and pursue their corrupted activity.

You have given momentum to the judiciary, so let it do its job...

And this is where lies your role, Judges;

What is required of you today is to commit to your oath, to carry out your duty “faithfully” and to be “honorable honest judges”; because no matter where it begins, the fight against corruption will end well in your hands, and its victory depends on your courage and integrity.

Since 2017, I have successively deferred to justice eighteen files related to cases of corruption and bribery in State administrations. To date, no verdict has been issued in any

of them. If late justice is no justice, then the late settlement of corruption cases is an inadvertent encouragement on corruption. Today, we rely on the recent judicial appointments to activate the role of the judiciary and reinforce its autonomy, to reach an independent, brave and fair judicial branch which would be the spearhead of the battle against corruption. I repeat that I will be a robust barrier and a ceiling of steel to protect the judiciary. In other terms, I will ban any interference therein based on my oath to preserve the Constitution and the laws.

### **My fellow Lebanese,**

We are on the threshold of the second Centenary of Greater Lebanon, and we find ourselves hostages of an acute economic crisis resulting from wrong economic policies and from corruption and waste in the administration throughout decades.

Let the coming year be a year of effective economic independence, through the conversion of the rentier economic pattern into a productive economy, by supporting agriculture and industry, adopting stimulating policies to make our production competitive on foreign markets, and dedicating all the attention to technology and knowledge economy, a sector in which Lebanon can be a serious competitor.

Yes, let us make it a year of effective economic independence by starting to drill the first off-shore oil well, and by adopting the law on the sovereign fund which will manage oil revenues, provided that it follows the highest global transparency standards.

Let us make it a year of geographical independence by holding on to every meter of water in our economic zone which is rich with natural resources, exactly as we hold on to every inch of our land, and as we seek to liberate the territories that are still under Israeli occupation.

Let us make it a year of environmental independence through the reforestation of mountains, especially those that were lately affected by fires...

Let us make it a year of effective social independence as well, starting with the adoption of the comprehensive protection law, also known as old-age security.

As for the full-fledged independence, we can only achieve it if we liberate ourselves from confessional and sectarian disputes, and begin with the necessary steps to establish the Civil State.

It's time for action and the government-to-be will find me ready to accompany its work and willing to push forward for the fulfillment of the achievements.

## **Fellow soldiers,**

Independence Day cannot pass by without addressing you because you were and you remain the shield of the country, the protectors of its independence and the bulwark of its unity.

The toughest missions that a soldier may face are domestic issues, as in your case, whereas you have to protect the freedom of the citizens who wish to express their opinion through demonstrations and sit-ins, and to protect as well the freedom of movement of the citizens who wish to go to work or home.

Your success in this critical mission is the gauge of the citizens' confidence in you, and confidence is precious and irreparable.

## **Dear Lebanese youth in particular,**

The uncontrollability of the rhetoric on the street is one of the biggest dangers that threaten the nation and the society, so do not forget that in the aftermath of this crisis, you will go back to your home, neighborhood, school, university, work...

You will go back to living together, so do not elaborate on the rhetoric of hatred and incitement because destruction is easy but construction is hard. Do not destroy the foundations of our society which rests upon the respect of the other and on the freedoms of belief, opinion and expression.

Your ancestors suffered greatly to preserve their free existence and independent being, and your parents went through all sorts of suffering in a devastating internal war that destroyed most of their dreams and hijacked the best years of their life.

Today, the legacy is in your hands and it is up to you to learn the relevant lesson.

**Long live Lebanon!**