

Ensuring the Fulfillment of Basic Human Needs in Face of Corruption and Thawra in Lebanon

Forum: Advisory Panel

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Introduction

Call it an October Revolution or nationwide mass protest, citizens of Lebanon are unanimously fighting for a change in the regime. Lebanon has a sectarian democratic government, which consists of 2 major (Muslim and Christian) and 16 minor religious sects sharing power to promote peace. This political system has encouraged many religious leaders to patronage their party only, disregarding the benefits of the country as a whole. Under this poor regime, Lebanon has been marked the third-most indebted country in the world and is facing an economic meltdown, wearying citizens down with inflation, unemployment, high taxes, and an overall lack of basic needs. According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), more than 50% of the Lebanese people are living in poverty, with shortages in food, clean water, electricity, and access to public services. Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and explosion of the Port of Beirut are making the situation even worse.

Background

The genesis of this sectarian government reaches back to Lebanon's civil war in 1975. Military forces from different religious and political parties fought each other for power, and Syrian and Iran later joined the war, exacerbating the crisis. After a devastating war, the major religious parties, mainly the Muslims and the Christians, signed the Taif agreement, making sure that all religious sects have some political power in the government, and this furnishes Lebanon's political system today. The president must be Maronite Christian, the prime minister is always a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the Parliament is from Shia Islam.

However, unlike what many expect, arguments between sects are not the rationale behind the mass protest. Political leaders, or Zuama, abusing power for political and fiscal gains is what that is making the Lebanese furious. Many critics claim that Lebanon's government is not really sectarian, but instead a source of political leaders' wealth. The government simply neglected the political, social, and economic issues in Lebanon and used banking systems to cope with their mismanagement and pursue ordinary citizens' finances for their own wealth, putting Lebanon into an economic freefall. As a result, many Lebanese are fighting for a revolution, or



Religious leaders signing the Taif agreement

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Thawra, and some are even petitioning for complete elimination of sectarianism, emphasizing that such a government system only encourages corruption.

The list of corruption cases Lebanon is currently facing is huge, and most of them refer to Lebanon's corrupt political class. For instance, electricity for citizens was gone for several hours a day, because the rich business people who are associated with politics were getting their profits by asking the residents to pay more money for electricity. In addition, when there was a wildfire in October 2019, the government did not have a firefighting aircraft available because instead of preparing for such an emergency, they were busy collecting money in their pockets.

Problems Raised

Economic Meltdown

Lebanon has a long-lasting government policy where the value of the Lebanese pound is attached to the US dollar. This policy was implemented by the government to connect with the world economy. However, this system became a big threat to the Lebanese economy in recent months.

Lebanon was already suffering from an economic meltdown due to the unstable sectarianism government and the influx of Syrian and Palestinian refugees. To make the matter worse, the coronavirus pandemic and the explosion of the Port of Beirut carried the economy even lower. Banks started to limit withdrawals, and citizens started to erupt into anti-government protests on the streets. Accordingly, there was a nationwide shortage of US dollars. To solve this issue, the central bank offered higher interest rates for larger deposits to sustain investments from wealthy investors and stabilize their economy. This method was later known as the Ponzi Scheme strategy.

In the end, the Ponzi Scheme strategy only exacerbated the US dollar shortage, and the central bank halted giving out dollars to account holders. Simultaneously, the value of the Lebanese pound lost two-thirds of its original value, increasing market prices and affecting the lives of many citizens who used to alter between the two currencies. Now citizens left with the Lebanese pound, with almost no value, are living in poverty. They lack money to buy necessities such as food, water, sanitation, etc., and cannot keep up with their lives.



Lebanese people rushing into banks to change their currency to US dollars

Famine

The ongoing economic fluctuation, nationwide revolution, and the coronavirus pandemic have struck Lebanon with a major food crisis. More importantly, the recent explosion at the Port of Beirut demolished the large grain silo, 15,000 metric tons of wheat, and the entry point of the essential food imports, making the lives of the citizens and refugees even harder. More than 3.7 million people in Lebanon are struggling to get an adequate amount of food, and

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the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that by early September 2021, there would be over 5,000 poor families who need immediate food assistance.

Moreover, due to the economic inflation – where the Lebanese pound is falling in value and prices are rising – farmers do not have enough money to buy chemicals or seeds needed to harvest their crops. As a result, there is a greater shortage in food supplies, aggravating the famine.

Lack of Access to Water and Sanitation

After the explosion in Beirut, about 300,000 people were left with a lack of access to safe water and sanitation services. In addition, approximately 300 buildings' water tanks have been damaged. As COVID-19 cases continue to rise, the Lebanese need to have access to water and sanitation. However, Lebanon currently has poor water quality due to the garbage crisis caused by the government's lack of proper waste management. Moreover, economic inflation is causing the price of clean water and sanitation to rise continuously, taking up 15% of an average Beirut family's income on clean water. As a result, more and more Lebanese are becoming vulnerable to diseases, and the UNICEF recently reported that the COVID-19 cases would skyrocket in Lebanon if there are no immediate solutions to this issue.



Polluted Litani River in Lebanon

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Electricity Crisis



Lebanese people connected electric wires to the generator to fight for power to survive

Lebanon is currently facing an acute power problem, especially in electricity. Lebanon was not able to supply 24-hour electricity to the citizens since their civil war, and the 6 million people living in Lebanon are now tired of the constant blackouts. This issue brought thousands of Lebanese out onto the streets and criticize the government for the under-investment in power plants.

Lebanon's electricity generation system is run by a Turkish company. However, due to the unstable

economy, the government has fallen way behind on their payments to the company. In addition, their contract with the Turkish firm expires in 2021, which makes it essential for the government to find new foreign investments to have an adequate amount of fuel to support their nation. Yet, Lebanon's government still failed to persuade any of the new or existing power stations to

supply them with power systems, and it looks like the electricity problem would become a lot worse.

The P5 Nations' Stances

China

In the past, the United States and other Western or Arab countries assisted Lebanon with great amounts of aid and money. However, as aids from these countries became scarce, Lebanon started to turn towards China for support.

Starting with the aid from China that came as soon as the coronavirus spread to Lebanon, the relationship between China and Lebanon got better and better. Approximately 80 percent of imports to Lebanon are from China, and these goods include electrical appliances, clothes, toys, furniture, food, etc. Many analysts and political experts believe that China is doing this primarily due to existing tensions between the US and China. By importing goods to Lebanon, the products made in the United States on the market are one by one replaced with items made in China, and this is extremely pestering the US, which has claimed that they are “taking all measures to contain China’s influence.”

United States of America

Since 2014, the United States assisted Lebanon with more than 4 billion dollars in total. They used this money to support them with economic and security needs. In addition, they also helped them with access to clean water and improved educational services. With these contributions, the United States expected Lebanon to come out of poverty and stabilize their economy. Yet, in the face of corruption and with no major changes in Lebanon, the United States claims that they would resist helping Lebanon unless they go through a reform that effectively uses the aid given.

United Kingdom

Since 2011, the UK has aided Lebanon in building water and sanitation facilities. In addition, they provided education for 300,000 children and created jobs for the Lebanese communities. The UK also sent 5 million euros to Lebanon after the explosion on the Port of Beirut to help the victims of the massive eruption.

France

The French President Emmanuel Macron has agreed with the United Nations, World Bank, and the European Union to aid Lebanon with food, healthcare, education, and the restoration of the Port of Beirut. Additionally, Macron promised to not only aid Lebanon with the current emergency crisis but also help them with long-term recovery in their nation. Accordingly, the French government is currently urging Lebanon leaders to reform their government by delivering to Beirut a two-page concept paper that guides them to the first step toward a new government. The paper included actions such as an examination of the central bank, the appointment of a temporal government for urgent reforms, and preparation for early legislative elections.

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Russian Federation

Russia has a regional interest in Lebanon as a main landmark on the East Mediterranean. Therefore, Russia maintains a strong tie with Lebanon's political elites. After the explosion in Beirut, Russia's President Vladimir Putin sent condolences, humanitarian aid, and even Russia's emergency and healthcare ministries to Lebanon. In addition, in support of Lebanon's officials, Russia strongly opposed an international examination of the explosion.

Possible Solutions

There are lots of aspects to the crisis in Lebanon, and it will be hard to address every single corruption case or cause of revolution at once. Yet, some major corruption cases and their possible solutions that must be focused on are the following:

Economic Crisis: Capital Control Act

The constant decrease in the value of the Lebanese pound is making the economy more and more unstable, and the fluctuation of the economy is often the source of corruption in Lebanon. One solution to this problem is to let the Lebanese government pass the "Capital Control Act." By implementing such a law, the government could be more transparent in its outflow of capital to the citizens and be more effective in controlling exchange rates. This law would help build more trust in the Lebanese fiscal system and the rule of law, which would improve the control of capital.

Political Crisis: Transparency and Accountability

Sectarianism is part of a tradition in the Lebanese government. This type of political rule has been implemented in Lebanon for a long time; therefore, a simple resignation of the political elites would not make any changes. Yet, changing the whole political system itself would take a long time, and many experts are claiming that we should take small steps to this reform.

One crucial step that must be taken by the Lebanese government would be ensuring transparency and accountability for the citizens. Currently, Lebanon scores 28 out of 100 in the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, and 68 percent of the citizens claim that most of their political elites are involved in corruption. Thus, by publicly disclosing the actions and decisions made among the officials, many believe that there would be a reduction in corruption in Lebanon.

Famine: Aiding the Farmers

Many farmers currently living in Lebanon do not have enough money to harvest and are not motivated to plant any crops since they do not receive any credit for doing such work. Therefore, Lebanon has to support the farmers to escape the famine loom. For instance, they should aid farmers to become more directly connected to the market so that they can easily sell their products and earn revenue. Donations can also be made for these farmers to constantly encourage them to plant more foods for the community.

Glossary

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Thawra: revolution in Arabic

Sectarianism: share of power across different religious sects or parties in a government

Zuama: the word Lebanese use to call their political leaders

World Food Programme (WFP): an organization that is part of the United Nations that help save hungry children and provide nutritious meals to families

Timeline

1944 – Lebanon earns independence from France.

1975 – Lebanon initiates a civil war.

October 1989 – The Muslims, Christians, and other religious officials sign the Taif agreement to halt the war. The first sectarian government is established.

October 1990 – The civil war officially ends.

2013 – Lebanon accepts an influx of refugees from Syria.

2019 – A big wildfire starts in a warehouse that stores cooking oil.

October 2019 – A nationwide Lebanese Revolution starts.

February 2020 – The COVID-19 pandemic spreads to Lebanon.

August 2020 – Ammonium nitrate in the Port of Beirut.

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