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A Sectarianised Pandemic: COVID-19 in Lebanon

by Rosita Di Peri

From the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, Lebanon confronted several transformational crises. In these crises, the attempt of Lebanese élites to maintain the sectarian system alive, a system that has increasingly become a tool of domination and control regulating Lebanese political, economic and social life, was challenged by regional turmoil as well as a series of domestic events.

First, on 17 October 2019, protests erupted and ultimately led to Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation in November. For years, the Lebanese had denounced the economic deterioration, increase in poverty and widespread corruption in the country. The proposal to introduce the so-called "WhatsApp tax" (a tax on telephone transactions via the internet) was the final straw and triggered a wave of revolts that quickly fanned out across Lebanon.

Then, at the beginning of March 2020, the newly formed government of Prime Minister Hasan Diab declared that the country was insolvent and could no longer meet its debt obligations. On 9 March, a bond payment of 1.2 billion dollars was suspended, which officially meant Lebanon defaulted with severe consequences on the purchasing power parity of Lebanese people because the impossibility to maintain a fixed exchange rate between the Lebanese pound and the US dollar.

Meanwhile, between February and March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had also reached the country, eventually leading to a lockdown on 26 March. However, the protests did not

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stop – least of all in the city of Tripoli, where the disastrous socio-economic situation pushed inhabitants to take to the streets despite the risk of contagion.

The explosion at the port of Beirut on 4 August struck within this precarious context, causing death, destruction and millions of dollars in damages. At such a critical moment, the irresponsibility of the Lebanese political class resulted in the resignation of Diab, who ended his mandate with a laconic "May God save Lebanon."

At the heart of the Lebanese crisis

The political and socio-economic crises that hit Lebanon in the past year are deeply rooted in the *laissez-faire* attitude of the Lebanese government after independence (1943) and the neoliberal privatisation following the end of the civil war (1990).[1] These policies helped boost the channels of patronage and corruption, as well as the sectarian system in all its forms.[2] The interweaving of the state, the economic-financial system and the sectarian system ultimately resulted in the Lebanese state defaulting in the spring of 2020.

The causes of the default can be found in the fixed exchange rate between the Lebanese pound and the US dollar, a key feature of the Lebanese system which, over the years, became increasingly unsustainable. In order to induce the inflow of dollars required to maintain parity and allow imports of primary goods,[3] the Lebanese Central Bank raised interest rates.

This, however, caused an immeasurable rise in Lebanon's public debt and the external current account deficit, neither of which can be offset by the Lebanese economic-financial system, which is no longer able to attract capital as it used to be (also guaranteed, over the years, by bank secrecy).

To be sure, this system's stability had already been severely affected in the past, but the political uncertainty in recent years (controversial role of Hezbollah, rumours of a new Israeli invasion, partial withdrawal of economic support by Saudi Arabia, the war in Syria and the presence of refugees) has resulted in a flight of capital to foreign countries, underscoring the seemingly insurmountable challenge of reforming the Lebanese banking system.

Lately, a further element has had an impact on this picture, namely the Lebanese government's budget crisis. To implement its policies, the government made extensive use of loans from the national banking system, which drew these funds from the savings of the Lebanese people.

The funds were granted to the government at very high interest rates;

[1] Carmen Geha, "Beirut Under Quarantine: Why Decades of Unshackled Neoliberalism Left Lebanon in Extreme Danger from Coronavirus", in *The New Arab*, 16 March 2020, https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2020/3/16/beirut-under-quarantine.

[2] Carolyn L. Gates, *The Merchant Republic of Lebanon. Rise of an Open Economy*, London/New York, Centre for Lebanese Studies in association with I.B. Tauris, 1998.

[3] This is necessary due to the weak Lebanese production capabilities – agriculture represents between 6 and 8 per cent of the entire production system while the industrial sector between 15 and 20 per cent.

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the state's inability to repay these loans has led to a crisis in the banking system, which has affected the account holders and, therefore, Lebanese citizens (particularly the middle class), who have seen their savings evaporate.[4]

Notably, the political class used these loans to feed their patronage and corruption networks, instead of investing in the public sector (e.g., the healthcare system), which has been heavily penalised.

A sectarianised healthcare system

Historically, the absence of the Lebanese state in the management of health services (84 per cent of hospitals in Lebanon are private) has strengthened their sectarianisation. Over time, all the 18 religious communities (or aggregation of communities) recognised by Lebanese Law (and, by extension, political parties) have tried to create consensus by controlling the provision of basic services (water, electricity, welfare, etc.).

One of the areas in which the accumulation of political capital was most explicit was indeed the provision of healthcare services. The creation of the National Social Security Fund in 1965 was not supported by adequate policies for, and investments in, the development of health infrastructures.

The outbreak of the civil war in 1975 weakened the welfare system and laid the foundations for militia-based welfare networks. This trend consolidated after the end of the civil war, when the state started to privatise healthcare services and stipulate contracts with private organisations, which were often managed along confessional lines.

This contributed to the consolidation of the sectarian system, which exploited the privatisation of welfare by bypassing (and often exploiting) state structures and acting as a mediator for access to those primary rights that should be guaranteed by the state.

As a result, the power of communities (at political and social levels) increased and sectarian monopolies on access to health services emerged, thereby fuelling inequality and silencing the voice of the weakest groups.[5]

"Sectarianising" the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, spread within a context already heavily weakened by multiple crises. They have seriously affected the healthcare system, for which public spending was cut by 7 per cent compared to 2019.[6] This has had an impact on the possibility of stocking up on devices necessary to fight the contagion (including masks, sanitisers and ventilators), which Lebanon has to import since there are almost no industrial plants capable of producing these materials in the

[4] Chloe Cornish, "Lebanon's Economic Crisis Threatens to Destroy Its Middle Class", in *Financial Times*, 15 June 2020, https://on.ft.com/3mXrplY.

[5] Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism. Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2014.

[6] Kareem Chehayeb, "For Lebanon, Coronavirus Is a Crisis in a Crisis", in *Middle East Eye*, 14 March 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/162271.

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country.

Immediately after the arrival of the pandemic, the Lebanese government attempted to implement a centralised approach by establishing a National Committee for COVID-19. One of the effects of creating this committee was to divert part of the (already scarce) resources from the primary healthcare centres (PHCs) to COVID-19 emergency centres.

These PHC centres, offering basic health services, are supported by the government in partnership with charitable and philanthropic organisations and NGOs. The severe economic crisis that has hit Lebanon has increased the number of Lebanese living below the poverty line[7] and the demand (rising 6 per cent per year) for the low-cost services offered by PHCs. The decline in resources and the increase in requests have resulted in PHCs being unable to continue providing basic services like vaccination.

The COVID-19 pandemic subsequently exacerbated the existing crisis. Instead of working to tackle it, the sectarian system (communities and political parties) tried to profit from it by "sectarianising" the pandemic.

The fear of losing consensus and legitimacy, especially after the wave of protests started in October 2019, has created self-defence and self-preservation mechanisms among the sectarian actors, leading to increased sectarianisation within the country.[8]

The pandemic was another weapon the sectarian powers had at their disposal. Exploiting the lockdown, the main Lebanese political parties tried to stifle protest movements, initially using health reasons (limiting the contagion), but then violently repressing those who continued to demonstrate, putting their legitimacy at risk. Perhaps the most striking example was the killing in Sidon of an unarmed young man, Fawaz Fouad al-Samman, on 27 April, which gave new momentum to the protest movement.

More generally, sectarian élites see the pandemic as threat to their power, one that may also pose the risk of re-establishing critical forces that had been silenced in the post-civil war years (e.g., Lebanon's left-wing parties and trade unions).[9]

The ongoing protests have indeed revitalised movements on the left, which, despite their differences, have often come together to join forces in the streets at important moments in the country's history.[10] New groups

[7] According to the Word Bank, 45 per cent of Lebanese people lives under the poverty line. See World Bank, *Targeting Poor Households in Lebanon*, 21 April 2020, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2020/04/21/targeting-poor-households-in-lebanon.

[8] Rosita Di Peri, "Stretching the Margins: Identity, Power and New 'Frontiers' in Lebanon's Maronite Community", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 25, n. 3 (2020), p. 332-350.

[9] Bassel F. Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, London, Pluto Press, 2015.

[10] Rita Bassil, Julie Kebbi and Soulayma Mardam Bey, "The Lebanese Revolution ...and the Awakening of the Left", in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 3 March 2020, https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1210052.

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have sprung up to fill the void left by the scarce presence of trade unions after the silencing and co-optation they have been subjected to, especially during Rafiq Hariri's mandates.

The birth of the Lebanese Professional Association, a collective of Lebanese professionals, exemplifies how Lebanese civil society is trying to re-organise amid the protests by encouraging the formation of alternative trade unions and attentively monitoring the reform process in the country after the revolts.[11]

What now?

The sectarianisation of the pandemic has further crippled the weakest groups that already were the most affected (and forgotten) by the system. These include Syrian refugees (in 2019, 914,600 registered with the UN[12] and more or less an equal number of un-registered individuals), who are the real left-behinds in the management of the pandemic as well as the Palestinian refugees, even more vulnerable now after the US has cut funding to UNRWA.[13]

Their situation worsened after the Beirut blast, which caused a diversion of funds toward reconstruction and ignored the needs of the refugees and non-Lebanese more broadly. If, generally speaking, the management of the refugee emergency has been delegated to private structures, which highlights the government's inability or unwillingness to develop a refugee policy, the COVID-19 pandemic and the August explosion further worsened the situation.

Also, especially among the more vulnerable groups, the social distancing and stay-at-home policies have proved ineffective when, in many cases, refugees are forced to live in precarious shelters without access to the healthcare system.[14]

The economic crisis, the revolts, the pandemic and the Beirut blast have given Lebanon a new opportunity to rethink the sectarian system and to reset the country. In the past, the narrative of Lebanese resilience and capacity to survive and reconstruct, no matter what, has been at the core of the representation of the Lebanese population, but as writer Liza Mounzer recently pointed out, "We Lebanese thought we could survive anything. We were wrong."[15]

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[11] Arab Reform Initiative, *The Lebanese Professionals Association: Meeting with Rima Majed* (video), 23 December 2019, https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=8547.

[12] UNHCR website: *2019 Year-End Report*, https://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2520?y=2019#year. See also Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020 (2020 Update)*, January 2020, p. 8, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74641.

[13] "US Ends Aid to Palestinian Refugee Agency UNRWA", in *BBC News*, 1 September 2018, https://bbc.in/3ic6xUn.

[14] Ola G. El-Taliawi and Tamirace Fakhoury, "What the Beirut Blast Means for Lebanon's Refugees", in *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 11 September 2020, https://www.thecairoreview.com/?p=11561.

[15] Lina Mounzer, "We Lebanese Thought We Could Survive Anything. We Were Wrong", in *The New York Times*, 3 August 2020, https://nyti.ms/2Rs4cJS.

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