

# Capitalizing on the Pandemic: Party Responses & the Need for Grassroots Organizing

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In the past three months, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the global neoliberal logics that have made most societies unable to manage the ensuing socioeconomic and health crises. From the ramifications of highly privatized healthcare systems to lacking social safety nets, corporate interests and weak state institutions have been detrimental to the welfare of populations around the world, particularly the most vulnerable.

The impacts of and responses to the pandemic in Lebanon provide us with a particularly interesting case study into the manner by which political authorities instrumentalize crises. It also uncovers the lack of organizational structures through which working classes can push for universal social safety nets. In turn, this piece is concerned with examining Lebanese parties' responses to the overlapping health, socioeconomic, and political crises, but it also seeks to shed light on emerging alternatives and the urgent need for class-based organizing.

## Responding to Covid-19: Clientelism, Charity, & Repression

Lebanon has been on partial lockdown since March 15. In a country already dealing with soaring unemployment rates, a depreciating currency, pay cuts, businesses shutting down, unsustainable inflation, and banks running out of liquidities, the already precarious living conditions of those residing in Lebanon were going to be tested even more. Rather than rely on the state to devise a comprehensive and thorough plan to help its population, political parties saw an opportunity to further their interests by rebuilding their clientelistic networks and remind people that they [have no one but them](#).

As such, parties deployed the resources at their disposal and made sure to advertise their efforts. For instance, each party had its own quarantining centers, and local news stations provided extensive coverage for those initiatives. On March 27, LBCI had a full [segment](#) in which it outlined the number of centers and rooms each party was providing to citizens. Meanwhile, parties were also deploying the municipalities they controlled: a number of [videos](#) were circulated on social media showcasing volunteers, vehicles, and trucks branded with the logos of their respective parties.

The state did implement a cash assistance program for the most deprived, amounting to 400,000 depreciating Liras, yet many protesters [rejected](#) it as an unsustainable and insufficient solution. Rather than treat the socioeconomic crisis as a systemic and structural issue in need of radical reforms, politicians and business elites instead resorted to charity. Most notably, during the infamous "Sar el Wa'et" [talk show](#), more than 3.2 billion LBP were reportedly donated from political and business leaders. The likes of billionaires Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati, as well as leader of the PSP Walid Jumblatt, also made donations. In addition, the Association of Banks in Lebanon – the group representing the interests of those withholding people's deposits – made a \$6 million [donation](#) to the government.

Political parties did not only capitalize on the crisis through their clientelistic networks: they also cracked down on protesters and symbols of the uprising. On March 27, when the country's curfew measures came into effect, riot police [tore](#) down dozens of protesters' tents in Downtown Beirut, which had been up since the first week of the uprising. Nearly a month later, a [raid](#) by members of political parties took place on other symbolic structures in Martyrs' Square. More recently, on May 3, the Lebanese army [removed](#) protesters' tents from the side of a road in Baalbak, following similar occurrences in other [squares](#) associated with the uprising.

When protesters sought to express their opposition to the measures undertaken by political parties, they were met aggressively by security forces. On March 29, Ghaith Hammoud – a protester in Akkar – was [arrested](#) by the Internal Security Forces after expressing his opposition to the clientelistic practices of parliamentarians in his district. Ghaith and his friends were shot at during the protest by the supporters of MP Walid al-Baarini, yet none of the latter were arrested by the ISF.

Despite these events, protests were rather limited during most of the lockdown period. However, since the night of April 27, what is being touted as the [second wave](#) of the Lebanese uprising began. Riots in Tripoli and Saida were at the forefront of the news. Violent responses by the army in Tripoli led to 26-year old Fawaz Fouad Al Samman [succumbing](#) to gunshot wounds. Meanwhile, reports of some of the worst kinds of [torture](#) have emerged from protesters detained by security agencies in Saida.

### **Emerging Alternatives and Class-based Organizing**

This crisis has once again exposed the Lebanese state's systemic violence and unwillingness to cater to its most vulnerable. The Lebanese working class has been pushed to the brink, with modest estimates placing [unemployment](#) at 30%, not to mention the prevalence of unprotected and [informal](#) labor across sectors. Soaring [inflation](#) has also made basic necessities inaccessible to many. Under such conditions, it is imperative for communities to find alternatives to the clientelistic networks of political parties. Throughout the postwar period, NGOs and charities filled some of the gaps left by the state, yet such alternatives are mere band-aids to a much larger wound. Not only do they ignore systemic and structural ailments, they also depend on these conditions for their survival as [top-down](#) institutions.

Considering these realities, many mutual-aid initiatives have emerged since the start of the uprising and cultivated solidarity networks that are community-driven and non-hierarchical. For instance, groups like [LibanTROC](#) and, more recently, "[Kitfi bi Kitfak](#)" (Shoulder to Shoulder) have become platforms for people to exchange basic goods, raise money, or resolve personal issues as a community. Essentially, they are functioning as alternative forms of grassroots-oriented safety nets.

Meanwhile, initiatives like the [Habag Movement](#) are seeking to develop self-sustainable local economies by encouraging cooperative farming, while others like the [Housing Monitor](#) look to guarantee housing rights by documenting violations and advocating for radical legal reform. These various initiatives, alongside many others, reflect how people recognize the state's inability and aversion to developing formal safety nets. They also uncover a larger move towards communities taking matters into their own hands, as highlighted by the emergence of various new political groups and unions.

Historically, labor unions used to be the main vehicle through which the working class pushed for its rights. Class-based organizing always posed a threat to Lebanon's elites because it undermines their [sectarianization](#) efforts, both materially and ideologically. In the pre-war period, particularly the early 1970s, industrial and agricultural workers were well organized and radicalized, engaging in multiple [mobilizations](#) against capitalist elites. During the 1990s, the General Labor Confederation (CGTL) was the key player opposing [neoliberal](#) policies and the growing rentier economy dependent upon clientelism.

Even since unions were co-opted in the late 1990s, they lack the independence required from political parties to be effective. As recently as 2011-2015, a [teachers-led](#) movement sought to reinvigorate the labor struggle, only to be defeated yet again by the sectarian establishment. With that historical context in mind, and recognizing the need to rebuild labor networks for the success of the uprising and beyond, various actors in 2019 thus took advantage of the revolutionary momentum in order to mobilize workers across sectors and found alternative [unions](#). These groups came together under the umbrella

of the Lebanese Association of Professionals (LAP), which includes professionals in the health sector (medicine, dentistry, pharmacy), engineers and architects, lawyers, social workers, journalists, economists, writers, artists, and university professors.

The need for such grassroots-based groups is dire. Indeed, the pandemic has further exposed the lack of social safety nets, the ensuing need for systemic reforms, and the fact that citizens lack the organizational structures needed to push for these rights. The only mobilizations in the Arab region that turned into relatively successful revolutions were the ones in Tunisia and Sudan, and both were led by strong labor [movements](#).

The LAP is far from ready to carry such a role, but it's a promising initiative that reflects people's growing will to organize politically. There are various other emerging groups, such as [LiHaqqi](#) and [Kafeh](#), that have similar ambitions and that are committed to class-based and grassroots-driven approaches to political organizing. Such initiatives can eventually come together as a broader coalition of progressive revolutionary forces, like the [Forces of Freedom and Change](#) in Sudan, but the key in the short-term is to expand their presence on the ground and become viable alternatives that the larger public can trust and support.

In turn, the foundations for alternatives to the political and economic status-quo are in the making. However, such efforts require time and experience to develop the capacity needed to become viable at a nation-wide level. In the short-term, mutual-aid initiatives and emerging political groups can help meet some of people's basic needs while curtailing clientelism and pushing for systemic reforms. At a time when the Lebanese state is moving closer towards an IMF [assistance](#) plan, pressure must be exerted as to guarantee progressive reforms that prioritizes the social protection of those most vulnerable.

This entails opposing austerity measures that further deplete the capacity of state institutions while pushing for progressive taxation, accountability and transparency mechanisms, and public investments in healthcare, education, and local productive sectors. A combination of these complementary short-term and long-term measures, alongside the growth of class-based organizing, is the sole solution to mitigate the damages of Lebanon's overlapping crises and establish a solid foundation for future recovery, social justice, and sustainable growth.

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