

The impact of COVID-19 on the revolutionary movement in Lebanon

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Democracy or dictatorship, a pandemic puts any society under pressure. History has proved that pandemics have the potential to bring out latent social tensions, leading to conflict, violence and even revolutions. But what if, as is the case in Lebanon, the pandemic struck an already ongoing movement? With this question in mind, the authors aim to identify how the Lebanese revolution has been and should be pursued during and in the wake of COVID-19. We moreover analyze what has happened in the two months of lockdown and how this resonates with the 'pre-Corona' phase.

After outlining a brief background on the ignition of the Lebanese revolution, we discuss the ways in which COVID-19 has led to an exacerbation of the political and economic grievances experienced by the Lebanese people over the past two months. Then, three observations of how the crisis has affected the protest movement are presented, based on interviews with actors from the Lebanese revolutionary field and a social media analysis. Here, theoretical concepts will be measured along the lines of the current Lebanese reality, laying bare an increased government control, the importance of 'public space' to revolt and the consequences of relative deprivation on the Lebanese citizens. The authors conclude with a number of recommendations for civil society, the opposition and citizens.

From protests to lockdown

The Lebanese people took to the streets en masse on October 17th of last year, concerned with widespread economic and political grievances. In an unprecedented display of unity and solidarity, protesters gathered across sectarian boundaries and challenged Lebanon's deeply ingrained sectarian system, the political elites and the corrupt banking sector. The protests have brought about the dismissal of prime minister Saad Al-Hariri in December and the formation of a new government under the leadership of [Hassan Diab](#) in January. After COVID-19 hit the country in February 2020, many Lebanese remained committed to the pursuit of revolting. By then, the protests entered their fourth month and showed [little sign of diminishing](#).

With this background in mind, the COVID-19 measures that were then consequently implemented by the government can be interpreted in a myriad of ways. Over the first weeks, the Lebanese largely complied with the measures and in fact, many citizens and organizations were quicker in responding than the government. On [March 26th](#), a partial curfew was imposed, which was the first of the '[patchwork approach](#)' the government adopted to tackle the pandemic. Its approach has made the systemic failures in the Lebanese governing system even more visible, showcasing the lack of institutional care for its citizens, the results of neglected public health services and a non-existent socio-economic pathway for improvement.

The lockdown moreover has caused the already critical Lebanese economy to spiral even further down. The Lebanese Lira has lost additional value, meaning that prices for food and services have soared. As a result, [75% percent](#) of Lebanese are now unable to meet their daily needs. Under these dire

circumstances, the limits of the state's power to curb people's access to the streets have begun to show. In April protesters returned to the streets, defying the lockdown en masse, now also risking the chance of getting infected with COVID-19.



"Revolt & stay safe", artwork by [Artorgism](#)

COVID-19 and increased government control

One of the worrying global [trends](#) observed over the last months, is that the pandemic serves as a means for authoritarian actors to strengthen their grip on power. The extraordinary measures that are needed to contain COVID-19 can easily function as a gateway to the abuse of power, as states may use the measures to opportunistically pursue their own interests. That some of the measures by the Lebanese government fall into that category, became clear on the first night of curfew (March 21st), when security forces [forcibly removed protesters's tents](#) from Beirut's Martyr Square. According to Dom Hunt, a Lebanon-based staff member of Concern Worldwide, the removal of the protests is an indication that the government is using the crisis as an excuse to tighten its control. As the government defends measures like these from the objective of containing COVID-19, it can be difficult to tell what the true intentions are. The crisis thus creates a grey area between measures which are in fact intended to control the virus and those that are aimed at tightening control over the population.

To Lebanese activists the state's intentions are evident. "Everything that the government was scared to do because of the people during the revolution, they did once the people left because of Corona", says blogger and activist [Gino Raidy](#). His statement indicates the high levels of resentment and distrust that many Lebanese feel towards the state. With this in mind, it should not come as much of a surprise that large scale protests have recently erupted once again. However, what has changed due to COVID-19 is that both protests and the government's response to them have hardened and grown more violent. Activists have continuously reported excessive use of force against them by the army; on April 27th a 26-year old [Tripolitan protester](#) was killed, and more recently a number of [activists were arrested](#) at their homes and taken into detention. Protesters have also become increasingly violent, as on "the night of the molotov" banks across the country were set on fire and protesters were reportedly [throwing stones and fireworks at soldiers](#).

Amidst these developments, Diab's government continues to increase the crackdown on protesters, while invoking COVID-19 as a legitimization. On May 5th, [the government](#) even publicly reminded security forces "to not go easy on suppressing violations [of the lockdown], in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19". In addition to the increasing tension between state and protesters, concerns have arisen about renewed tensions across sectarian lines. Some political elites seem eager to jump on the bandwagon of the protests, if that means that they can regain influence that they have lost pre-COVID-19. Pondering the possible consequences of such developments, Dom Hunt raises the question: "What will happen if the different sects start blaming each other for the current situation?". The answer remains to be seen.

The importance of the streets

With the removal of protesters from Martyr's square on March 21st, the impact of COVID-19 on the ability to continue protests initially seemed stifled. The protesters who had still been in the streets were now confined to their homes and unable to physically meet and organize or demonstrate. Under these circumstances the people were surprisingly fast to adapt and come up with innovative ways to continue their revolutionary activities. [Car protests](#) were organized, even more revolutionary texts spray painted on [walls](#) and people voiced themselves by banging pots and pans on their balconies. Some of the physical activities were successfully moved online; a recent webinar organized by oppositional party [Lebanese National Bloc](#) had around 28.000 views, according to its outreach coordinator Mohammad Serhan.

But a revolution cannot unfold without access to the streets, because it is on the streets that the people can confront state power in a way that it cannot be ignored (Pile and Keith 2009, 1). The importance of public space to protest movements has been widely described to movements from the French Revolution to the Arab uprisings of 2011. It is in the streets that people across the sectarian and class lines meet, and collectively experience and express their grievances (Bayat 2013, 184). Moreover, in places where the state has effectively banned people from the streets, it has caused dramatic setbacks for social movements. The Green Movement in Iran serves as a relevant example, as a brutal crackdown meant a major setback and largely a disintegration of its organization (Ibid., 300).

Activists themselves have been the first to acknowledge the importance of the streets. “The streets define everything”, activist [Jean Kassir](#) told us. “Online activities help to organize protesters, but the streets impose the political reality.” Kassir’s statement resonates with what we know about the role of social media in revolutionary movements. While the online sphere has been dubbed an ‘alternative public space’, a closer look reveals that its main function is organisatory (Mitchell 2013, 144). Even during the Arab uprisings of 2011, which was hastily called a [Facebook-revolution](#) by some, it was not until the people took to the streets that the movement began to have a serious impact (Bellin 2012, Haugbolle 2013). Hence, while social media is immensely important for communication and organization, Lebanese activists agree that for the movement to have its impact the streets are crucial. It is therefore unsurprising that the Lebanese have proven very eager to return to the streets, especially as the already deep-running grievances have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.



“When the people are starving, revolution is a must”, artwork by [Artorgism](#)

The consequences of relative deprivation

What moreover should be kept in mind is that the banning of protests from the streets, comes with another risk. As Opp & Roehl (1990, 6) indicate, the repression of political protest often has a radicalizing effect. Depriving people of the opportunity to voice their grievances, can be a catalyst for more anger, after which the protests seem to only become more violent. As explained above, this is also the case for Lebanon. According to Gino Raidy the “government uses Corona to suppress the people more”, and as a result “the coming wave of protests will become even worse. It’s about life and death”.

The notion of protesting for 'life and death' does not only indicate the growing anger and resentment towards the government, but also relates to the relative deprivation theory, coined by Ted Robert Gurr (1971). The theory suggests that people who feel that they are deprived of something essential in their society (as food, money, political freedom) are more likely to organise, i.e. in the form of protests, to demand those things of which they feel deprived (Saleh 2013; Imhonopi et al. 2013; Farooq 2017; Roehl & Opp 1990). Mohammad Serhan furthermore explains that during the pandemic, the government's failure of delivering basic services has resulted in "people feeling they are more responsible to take care of each other". Traditionally, sectarian actors have been filling the void of the government by providing essential services to their constituency. Under the current circumstances, there is an even heightened need for these services and new political movements have also been trying to take this role upon themselves. For example, through producing surgical masks, arranging accommodation for nurses and paramedics close to hospitals, and providing food parcels to those in need, new political movement [Min Tishreen](#) aims to cater to the Lebanese as a whole. These oppositional services, according to Mohammad Serhan, show the people the importance of a strong central political leadership to structurally fulfil this role.

However, feelings of deprivation did indeed aggravate, especially among the most vulnerable groups. Dom Hunt affirms this, stating that "for people who were already struggling it all gets worse, and anger begins to grow among this group". This increasing economic desperation is also expressed in revolutionary slogans, one trending post among online activists reads "when people starve, revolution is a must". This then brings us back to the notion that pandemics lead to increased latent social tensions, or even revolutions.

Conclusion and recommendations

Throughout this article, we have laid bare three observations of recent happenings that are vital for understanding how COVID-19 has influenced the Lebanese protest movement. COVID-19 has been a catalyst in a rapidly deteriorating political and economic situation in Lebanon. We see the severe economic problems and volatile atmosphere among the population as cause for grave concern for the future developments. Moreover, while currently the spread of COVID-19 seems to be under control, it is highly likely that a second wave will present itself. We cannot assume that the (public) health crisis has been dealt with.

Before we present our recommendations, we do suggest to keep in mind the following: the current situation in Lebanon is different for all citizens, and the authors do not aim to generalize or over-simplify the happenings. The recommendations provided come forth from the research, analysis and interviews conducted for this article, and are intended as tools to improve the volatile situation that is currently unfolding. It must however be stressed that we do not claim to present fully comprehensive recommendations, given the complexity of the situation and its constantly changing nature.

Recommendations to the different stakeholders

Government

- Security forces should halt all violence against protesters;
- Security forces should provide space for people to protest, in order to prevent the protests from radicalizing further;
- The government should furthermore create a 'safe protesting environment';
- The government should be transparent about how the COVID-19 crisis is being handled. This is essential to build trust between the government and its citizens;
- Given the dire economic circumstances for many Lebanese people, it has to be emphasized that the government should prioritize providing essential goods to those in need without discriminating between them.

The political opposition and social movements

- Those who are in opposition to the government should actively involve civilians from across Lebanese society in political discussions, so as to create a holistic and inclusive roadmap for future political organization;
- Organizations should continue to make use of online platforms as tools for civic engagement and dialogue. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration that not all activities can or should take place in the online sphere;
- Building forth on the above, organizers of protests should contribute to organising 'safe protests'. This can include reminding protesters of social distancing measures, distributing masks and gloves, and providing information on how to use these tools in a correct way. The last is important, as face masks are ineffective in preventing catching the virus if used incorrectly;
- It is crucial that social movements and political opposition remain non-sectarian and include all Lebanese citizens in providing a brighter future, i.e. through the provision of basic services, or the necessary equipment to organize safe protests (masks, disinfectant, etc.).

Protesters

- Individual protesters should be mindful of the health risks of COVID-19 and comply with social distancing measures as much as is possible;
- Protesters should contribute to the distribution of masks and gloves and provide information on how to use these tools in a correct way.

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