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Lebanon, a small country with many crisis

Lebanon, despite being a small country with a surface area of only 10,452 km², has in recent years accumulated crises of all kinds: environmental, political, economic and now health-related.

Historically, this Middle East multi-religious country has been home to various populations fleeing war or persecution: the Armenians fleeing the Turkish genocide in 1915, the Palestinians fleeing the occupation of Palestine in 1948, the Iraqis fleeing the war in Iraq in 2003 and finally the Syrians fleeing the war in Syria in 2011. This characteristic of being a host country has undoubtedly marked its contemporary history and present.

In 1975 pro-Israeli Christians and Muslims and pro-Palestinian Druze fought against each other in the 15-years Lebanese civil war. As a consequence large part of the population went into exile and the Lebanese diaspora in the world is estimated to be between 8.6 and 14 million people.

The war ended with an agreement between the country's religious factions that stipulated the creation of a confessional government, meaning that the government is *de jure* a mixture of religion and politics. In this case therefore, the president of Lebanon will always be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister will always be a Sunni and the president of the parliament will always be a Shiite.

Unfortunately, in Lebanon this form of government has never worked as a government itself but each party has acted in a client-based manner with its own religious faction, thus securing votes in elections and social support. Also since the conception of this government, there have been great episodes of corruption that have led Lebanon to be the third country worldwide with a higher foreign debt relative to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 152% in 2018 (tradingeconomics, 2020). It is estimated that this debt has increased in recent months.

Corruption, political patronage, no state investment in infrastructure or public services and irregularities in the last political elections led half of the Lebanese population, regardless of their religious faction, on the streets to demand the resignation of the government in October 2019. These demonstrations led to a change of faces in the government but no change in the exercised political practices.

It is in this context of political and economic crisis that covid-19 arrived in Lebanon. The government, aware of the lack of health services and the inability to deal with a large number of cases, quickly closed schools, restaurants, ports and airports. It also imposed from 15 March onwards strict lockdown measures with curfews, financial fines and potential prison.

Before the arrival of the covid-19, the country had only 130 intensive care beds for the 6 million residents. Moreover, 80% of the hospitals are private and related to specific political and religious groups. That means that despite the availability of services they are not accessible to everyone, evidencing the existing political patronage that the popular demonstrations called for extinction.

Due to such severe restrictive measures, the health impact to date has been relatively low: 26 deaths and 1,086 positive cases (23 May). However, the socio-economic impact has been very high: the level of poverty in the country has increased from a third to half of the population, and in many cases the poverty is extreme. The confinement has resulted in the loss of jobs for a large part of the population who were economically dependent on their daily work. According to official government figures, 30% of businesses have closed. However, 80% of the Lebanese population works in the informal economy which, due to restrictive measures, has been totally paralyzed.

Still, there has been a devaluation of the Lebanese currency, the Lebanese Lira (LL). Previously \$1 was equivalent to 1,500 LL but now it is equivalent to 2,400 LL, a 60% devaluation rate. Also, the basic goods have become 60% more expensive and the large Lebanese diaspora cannot send money in the country because money transfer services are paralyzed. Since October 2019, the banks have closed for certain periods of time as a measure of pressure on the popular demonstrations against the government, allowing only \$100 per week per person to be withdrawn.

As a result and despite the confinement, many Lebanese continue to protest in the streets, especially in the country's poorest city, Tripoli. The protesters say that "here the virus is the political system and it will not stop until the corrupt and undemocratic system changes". The international media says that due to the levels of poverty and the increasingly desperate situation for the Lebanese the protests will increase as well as the violence in them.

The government has asked the International Monetary Fund for help in dealing with the economic crisis. However, many Lebanese are expressing their fear of the draconian conditions that the IMF would impose and how difficult it would be to meet them. In addition, the few resources the government currently has instead of being invested in the population are being invested in creating a concrete wall around the Prime Minister's building and the parliament to stop potential protests. The already unequal system has thus exploited and the remedy has been worse than the virus itself.

References:

Trading economics. Lebanon Government Debt to GDP. 2020. Disponible:

<https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/government-debt-to-gdp>

The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocossc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>