

Contextualizing the Current Social Protest Movement in Lebanon

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MARTIN BECK, OCT 10 2015

The Current Social Protest Movement in Lebanon

The recent social protest movement in Lebanon, which started in late August, made it to the headlines of international media with its slogan “You Stink.” Yet, the movement is not confined to decrying the incapability of the administration to collect garbage in Beirut and its surroundings. Rather, as Jamal Elshayyal from Al-Jazeera put it, the social movement pointed from the very beginning to the “inherent corruption within the state.” In September the social movement developed into “a full-fledged movement against political corruption.”

The process of politicizing corruption on a global scale started only in the 1990s. Visible milestones of this ongoing process were the foundation of Transparency International in 1993 and the adoption of the Convention against Corruption by the General Assembly of the United Nations ten years later. In the Middle East, corruption was first politicized by different Islamist movements, but then also became a centrepiece on the agenda of secular opposition groups. One of the major lasting impacts of the “Arab Spring” is that abolishing corrupt systems, which was declared one of the major political aims of the revolutionary movements in Tunisia, Cairo and other places in the Arab Middle East in 2010/11, ranks high on the political agenda of opposition groups in all over the Arab world. That is remarkable, as the political demand of systematically combating corruption touches the fundamentals of the Arab political systems. From the perspective of many activists in the different social movements, successfully combating corruption in the Middle East requires deep political reforms, if not a radical change of the entire political system.[1]

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (2014), the (Arab) Middle East is *not* particularly corrupt. Some Arab countries are among the most corrupt countries worldwide (Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria), but the six Gulf monarchies and Jordan score significantly better than the global average. However, in comparison to Western societies, the public and governmental sectors in the Arab world play a much more significant role in both the economic and political realms. Therefore, even in a country like Jordan, which ranks 55 among 174 in the Index, decrying corruption touches the basics of the political and social order (Beck and Hüser 2015).

Due to the pronounced pluralistic character of its political system, Lebanon differs politically in many ways from the authoritarian regimes in the Arab Middle East. Yet, in terms of the politicization of corruption, it shares some similarities with its Arab neighbours. Lebanon is among the more corrupt countries in the Middle East, as it ranks 136 on the Corruption Perceptions Index. According to Lebanese public opinion, the four centres of gravitations of corruption in Lebanon are, in rank of relevance for the Lebanese corruptive system as perceived by the Lebanese public, the established political parties, public administration, the parliament, and the police (Wickberg 2012: 1). The Lebanese sectarian system serves as the fertile soil for systemic corruption: The leaderships of the established political parties control strong patronage networks which are used to bind their client groups, mostly defined as “their” religious communities. As Nisreen Salti and Jad Chaaban (2010) show, allocation of public funding in the realms of health, education, and infrastructure follows sectarian lines rather than socio-economic needs.

Bribery of domestic public officials is a criminal offense in Lebanon, but specific legislation to combat corruption is underdeveloped and—where it exists—the gap between law output and law implementation is wide (Ibid: 6-7).

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Political finance is particularly poorly designed. No law regulating the activities of political parties exists; in terms of political financing, the provisions of the 2008 Parliamentary Election Law are confined to election campaigns, and in fact to the election campaigns of individuals, whereas political parties are not even mentioned (Ohman 2009).

The active participation of Lebanon in the “Arab Spring” was unsurprisingly low: Given the pluralist character of the Lebanese political system, it simply would not have made much sense to organize mass demonstrations as in Tunis and Cairo to demand that the authoritarian leadership should step down. However, simultaneously to the “Arab Spring,” the Anti Secular Movement (ASM) emerged in Lebanon in 2010/11, which in its political communication appeared as radical as the Tunisian movement, when it adapted the Tunisian slogan of “The people wants the fall of the regime” to “The people wants the fall of the confessional regime” (Meier 2015: 178). In terms of the logic of political action, the movements of the “Arab Spring” and the Lebanese ASM were connected through the denunciation of corruption: all political and socio-economic grievances both in the authoritarian Arab systems and the Lebanese sectarian system culminated in corruption, which deprives people of access to dignified opportunities in life (cf. Meier 2015: 176, 183-4).

Corruption in Lebanon: A Normative Perspective

Corruption is a highly normatively loaded term. Definitions entail pejorative terms such as “deviation” or “abuse.” For instance, Joseph S. Nye (1967: 419) defines corruption as “behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence.” Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International 2015).

Thus, the assertion that the Lebanese system is highly corrupt comes with a strong value judgement. Value judgements, however, should be contextualized. In the present case, it is firstly to be noted that Western systems in general can hardly serve as a model in terms of combating corruption: There is no pure meritocratic system on the globe in which all resources are transparently allocated. Although many Western systems, particularly the Scandinavians headed by Denmark, are significantly less corrupt than most Middle Eastern systems, it should not be overlooked that Jordan and the Gulf monarchies perform better in the Transparency Perceptions Index than EU members Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Romania; Qatar even performs better than France.

Secondly, the corrupt Lebanese system is not the impact of traditional or autochthonic structures. Rather, modern Lebanon was set up by France in the frame of the Post-Ottoman mandate system. Imperialist France actively promoted the sectarian system and the politicization of religion in Lebanon with the aim of controlling a fragmented society. Furthermore, external interference did not end with Lebanese independence in 1943 but has become a systemic aspect of Lebanese political affairs.

The Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), re-institutionalized the confessional system by integrating the warlords and the corruption-based socio-economic systems they had established during the war (Gebara 2007: 9-11). Western support for the March 14 Alliance headed by Saad Hariri contributes to fostering the sectarian system, which, in turn, promotes the corrupt Lebanese system. In some cases Western support is even funded by public development aid, as is the case of the German political foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), which, in line with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) it is affiliated with, supports the Lebanese Forces. There are also reports that international aid provided to Lebanon to support Syrian refugees has been abused in corruptive ways.

Rent-Seeking in Lebanon: An Analytical Perspective

Why is the Lebanese system highly corrupt? When the same question is applied to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, it is much easier to answer: in authoritarian systems, social groups lack the means to challenge the political leaderships who promote corrupt systems to stabilize their political rule and/or for material self-privileging. Yet, although Lebanon is not a fully-fledged democracy due to the absence of a state monopoly of power and the lack of the rule of law, the pluralist system secures freedom and participation rights to a much higher degree than in its

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authoritarian neighbouring countries.

How can a corrupt system survive in an environment in which people have some say? As in any country, in Lebanon, too, corruption causes sub-optimal allocation of resources. As Moe Farida and Fredoun Z. Ahmadi-Esfahani (2008) show, Lebanese growth is highly negatively affected by corruption. What prevents people from abolishing a system or what makes them even contribute to its maintenance, although it is collectively sub-optimal?

When applying this analytical question, it is preferable to work with a term that is less normatively-loaded and not used as a political catchword like *corruption*: rent(-seeking). Rent-seeking refers to a behaviour that aims at acquiring a specific sort of income: rents (Buchanan *et al.* 1980). Rent income is not balanced by labour or investment. Thus, although there are many sorts of rents that are not the outcome of corruption (for example the oil rent received by the Gulf States), it is safe to say that all income generated from corruption is rent income. According to rent theory, becoming engaged in rent-seeking—rather than in more productive activities such as profit-seeking—is from the perspective of the individual not necessarily irrational, very often it is actually individually rational. If the socio-economic system to which an individual or a group is exposed sets more incentives for rent-seeking in terms of promising income generation than it does for productive activities, people will tend to take part in rent-seeking.

When persons or groups become engaged in rent-seeking this may be rational, even if they know that they are thereby supporting a system that contributes to a misallocation of resources. In a recent report of the International Crisis Group (ICG 2015: 12), a Tripoli resident is quoted as both complaining about vote buying and still admitting to participating in it. If the idea of corruption alone is applied, such behaviour appears to be simply “destructive,” as the ICG report puts it. And although that is true insofar as such behaviour strengthens systems that are corrupt at the expense of the society as a whole, the rent-seeking approach helps us to understand that the Tripoli resident is actually acting in an individually rational way. She or he is caught in a Prisoner’s Dilemma. As in the “Tragedy of the commons,” (Ostrom 1990), his or her individually rational behaviour contributes to the maintenance of a collectively sub-optimal outcome, very similar to the European who drives a car despite her awareness that this behaviour is contributing to climate change. Both the Tripoli resident and the European car driver may claim that their contribution to changing the “system” is so low that it is not worth the effort of changing their respective behaviour. The Tripoli resident may even claim moral superiority to the European car driver, insofar as the system she or he is exposed to fails to provide him or her with sufficient meritocratic income opportunities, whereas the car driver could use public transportation. The Tripoli resident is participating in a system that (s)he did not install and to whose maintenance his or her contribution is rather marginal. Those whose contribution to the maintenance of the corrupt system is most significant are the leaderships of the established political parties. They have a strong incentive to maintain the sectarian system with all its negative repercussions for the society as a whole, as it enables them to privilege their client groups (and possibly themselves). It is a real irony of Lebanese political history that the otherwise quarrelling leaderships of the established parties act like holders of a cartel when it comes to maintaining the sectarian system.

Outlook

Social movements that seek to combat corruption in Lebanon face a large number of obstacles when attempting to apply strategies that seem to be suitable to change the overall system. Any Lebanese movement that aims at touching the fundamentals of the sectarian system meets strong opposition from the established political leadership. As happened in the case of ASM, this very often leads to a split in the thereby weakened movement (Meier 2015: 184): a radical segment of the movement may argue for a strict non-collaboration policy with the establishment, as they are—rightly—perceived as part of the problem. Yet, a reformist segment may—rightly—argue that to antagonize the whole political class significantly reduces the chances of achieving anything. Also in the current movement intra-organizational conflicts already emerged, as *inter alia* became visible in the competing slogans “You stink” and “You are accountable.” Moreover, it is very difficult in the Lebanese system to successfully change the game of party politics by founding a party that runs in elections, as the electoral system in Lebanon is tailored according to the needs of sectarian parties. In addition, a party whose campaign is based on the idea that the voter should go for the common good rather than his or her particular self-interest will face quite a number of voters who are hesitant or even reluctant to do so. Additionally, upholding constant public pressure with demonstrations and other forms of resistance is very costly in terms of time and energy invested—for a common good whose likelihood of being achieved in the

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foreseeable future is rather low. It remains to be seen whether the “You are accountable” movement will be capable of overcoming these hindrances.

Notes

[1] The politicization of corruption has also become sensible in its wording. Orientalizing corruption by using terms like *wasta* (Arabic for nepotism or clout) with a romantic hint has become less common.

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