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معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة



HuMENA
For Human Rights and Civic Engagement

RETHINKING ACTIVISM IN LEBANON IN THE ERA OF SOCIO- ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Authors:**Mostafa Fouad**

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement - Head of Programs

Sarah Sheikh Ali

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement – Executive Director

Rim Ashour

Researcher at SKI for Research & Consulting

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICU	Intensive Care Unit
IMPACT	Inter-Ministerial and Municipal Platform for Assessment
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UDHR	The Universal Declaration for Human Rights
UN	United Nations

INTRODUCTION

Background

Lebanon has been historically eminent for its favorable environment to freedom of expression and right to peaceful assembly¹. Its multicultural society, vibrant media landscape, and cultural and intellectual heritage have fostered an environment conducive to open discussions and diverse viewpoints². The eventful history of activism in Lebanon is characterized by widespread citizen engagement and mobilization around various social, political, and economic issues. The country has witnessed numerous waves of protests and social movements that have played a crucial role in driving social change and advocating for rights and justice³.

Throughout the timeline of cultivated civic engagement, activism in Lebanon has been impacted by the country's various developments, especially regarding the ongoing economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lebanese state, facing the hurdles of a collapsing economy, contributed to the emerging forms of activism taking place whilst imposing limitations on mobility, as the virus itself prompted human movement restrictions. Collectively, these developments have reshaped the dynamics of Lebanese activism which demonstrated resilience and came to light in various forms.

Understanding the evolving strategies employed by activists provides insights into the resilience and adaptability of civil society in the face of unprecedented economic challenges and perplexities brought along by the Coronavirus spread. The pandemic has brought socio-economic inequalities and political grievances to the forefront, further fueling the urgency for change. With imposed lockdowns and restrictions on in-person gatherings, Lebanese activists adapted by harnessing digital platforms and social media to connect, organize, and raise awareness about pressing issues. That said, it is crucial to probe how activism was influenced in light of the complexities arising especially in the event of impeding its main components.

Historical Context

Over centuries of occupation, Lebanon witnessed sporadic acts of resistance against imperial rule. Local leaders, religious figures, and intellectuals often played key roles in mobilizing communities against oppressive policies⁴. "Al Fatat", co-founded by Lebanese Rustom Haidar during the Ottoman occupation⁵, nurtured an environment for independence advocacy and challenged the prevailing social and political order, amplifying nationalist sentiments⁶. Following that era, the legacy of Lebanese activism continued to inspire contemporary activists in their pursuit of independence especially during the French mandate⁷.

1 A. Najjar, **Lebanon and Freedom of Speech. Freedom of Expression, Literature, and Culture**. PEN/Opp. 2020.

2 M.C. Hudson, **Democracy and Social Mobilization in Lebanese Politics. Comparative Politics**, 1(2), 1969. p. 245, 247.

3 A. Assi, **Lebanon's Protest Movements of 2015 And 2019: A Comparative Analysis. Friedrich Naumann Stiftung**, 2021, page 6.

4 U. Makdisi, After 1860: Debating Religion, Reform, and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire. **International Journal of Middle East Studies**, 34(4), Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 611.

5 أحمد قنري، مذكراتي عن الثورة العربية الكبرى، مطابع ابن زيدون، 1965، ص 12.
[A. Qadri, **My Memoirs on the Great Arab Revolt**, Ibn Zaydun Press, 1965, p. 12.

6 R.I. Khalidi, **The Press as a Source for Modern Arab Political History: 'Abd al-Ghani al-'Uraisi and al-Mufid. Arab Studies Quarterly**, 3(1), 1981, p. 25.

7 F. Traboulsi, From Mandate to Independence (1920–1943). In **A History of Modern Lebanon**, Pluto Press, 2012, p. 105.

The period from 1982 to 2000 showcased the potency of deep-rooted activism when the Lebanese involvement took place through mobilized armed forces of various resistance groups to confront the Israeli occupation⁸.

Another pivotal moment in Lebanese activism was the Cedar's Revolution of 2005. Determined to end the Syrian Occupation, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese erupted in a massive revolution, transcending sectarian and political divisions⁹. Its legacy remains influential, inspiring subsequent generations of Lebanese activists and reinforcing the belief in the power of peaceful mobilization to bring about change¹⁰.

Aspects of Modern-Day Activism: Pre-Crisis Era

In the contemporary times, the Lebanese civil society grew more vibrant, with numerous non-governmental organizations actively engaged in advocacy, human rights, development, and social justice work¹¹. Lebanese activists have undeniably played a crucial role in recent activism, expressly voicing their concerns and organizing grassroots movements. Such initiatives addressed issues such as economic decline, political corruption, and social matters¹². Particularly, in the era of economic collapse followed by the 2019 protests, Lebanese activists have persistently sought to create a more inclusive and equitable society amid numerous complications¹³. The protests were driven by a combination of grievances.

Politically, the demonstrations demanded the eradication of corruption and the accountability from the ruling class¹⁴. The Lebanese have expressed frustration with a political system that perpetuates sectarian divisions and favors entrenched interests over the needs of the people¹⁵.

Economically, a deepening financial crisis and a deteriorating socio-economic situation triggered the protests. High unemployment rates and hyperinflation due to a currency peg have left many struggling to make ends meet¹⁶. Calls were made for reforms and transparency in addressing the mismanagement of public funds¹⁷.

Socially, the mobilization in Lebanon has transcended traditional sectarian divides and united people from various backgrounds. Demonstrators have emphasized a shared national identity and a rejection of sectarianism¹⁸. The protests became a space for citizens to voice their concerns about issues such as social inequality and inadequate public services.

8 S.G Hajjar, The Convoluted and Diminished Lebanese Democracy. *Democracy and Security*, 5(3), 2009, p. 261–276.

9 S. Hanafi, A. Knudsen, & R. Flahive, Trial of the Status Quo: *The Politics of Mediated Justice in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon*. *The Arab Studies Journal*, 24(1), 2016, p. 70.

10 Wither the Cedar Revolution: *Two Lebanese Deputies Give Their Views*. 2020. *Wilson Center*

11 M-N. AbiYaghi, L. Yammine, & A. Jagarnathsingh, Civil Society in Lebanon: *The Implementation Trap*. *Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Lebanon Support*. 2019.

12 *Civil Society Knowledge Centre. Social Movement Responding to The Lebanese Garbage Crisis*. 2016.

13 B. Salloukh. *Understanding the Dynamics of Lebanon's Protest Movement*. *TRT World Research Centre*. 2019. p. 1

14 B. Salloukh. *Understanding the Dynamics of Lebanon's Protest Movement*, *ibid*, p.3.

15 P. Manduchi, (Ed.). Lebanon, Confessionalism, Protests: *Challenging The Ancient Regime (Working Paper 1)*. In N. Ziadeh-Mikati, F. Barroso, A. Sadaka, & W. Raad (Contributors), *UNIMED - Unione delle Università del Mediterraneo*. 2021. p. 14

16 *UNICEF - ILO. Synthesis Of The Crisis Impact On Lebanon*. 2020

17 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / *The World Bank. Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF)*. 2020. p. 14

18 P. Manduchi, (Ed.). Lebanon, Confessionalism, Protests: *Challenging The Ancient Regime*. *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

The Problematic Aspects Surrounding Activism: Challenges and Complexities

The dynamic characteristic of the Lebanese society made it safe haven for vulnerable groups and religious minorities, exemplified by the refuge Lebanon has offered to communities during times of persecution¹⁹. This commitment to diversity and inclusivity extends to the country's protection of constitutional rights, including freedom of speech as a fundamental principle along with the right to peaceful assembly²⁰. Internationally, Lebanon upholds these fundamental liberties by ratifying the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Of particular significance are Articles 19 and 21,²¹ which safeguard the principles of freedom of expression and right to peaceful assembly. Lebanon's ratification signifies its acknowledgment of the importance of protecting these rights and aligning its domestic laws and practices with international human rights standards²².

Despite the recognition of the fundamental liberties of speech and assembly as constitutional, various complexities emerging from the economic and political crisis have further influenced the dynamics of activism. The subsequent challenges posed by economic collapse in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated tensions and added layers of complexity to the ongoing Lebanese activism. These challenges encompassed various dimensions, including lockdown measures, instances of military and security forces' brutality against protesters, and interference by some political parties seeking to dismantle the protests.

Methodology for Probing Activism: Analytical Framework and Research Approach

This paper adopts a comprehensive methodology to probe the influence of the economic collapse and COVID-19 restrictions on activism in Lebanon, focusing specifically on the freedom of speech and the right to peaceful assembly as its main components. From both descriptive and normative perspectives, the paper conducts an empirical analysis to portray the nature and phenomenology of activism during the crisis. Subsequently, the paper evaluates Lebanon's compliance with its international obligations as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Lebanon is a ratifying state. Moreover, the constitutional recognition of these rights within Lebanon is analyzed. Overall, the methodology involves a qualitative approach, encompassing data collection from publicly available sources and existing knowledge, analysis of the framework governing activism, and an assessment of the impact on activism amidst the crisis.

19 J. Castellino, & K. A. Cavanaugh, *Minority Rights in Lebanon*. In *Minority Rights in the Middle East*. Oxford Academic. 2013, p. 18-

20 Lebanese Constitution 1962 (rev. 2004). Article 13. The freedom to express one's opinion orally or in writing, **the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association shall be guaranteed within the limits established by law.**

21 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted 1996 by the General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), **United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner**

22 **Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), Civil and Political Rights in Lebanon, Arab Human Rights Fund, 2012, p 6.**

SHIFTS IN ACTIVISM

Lebanese activism has undergone significant transformations after the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst these related crises, activism has emerged as a dynamic force, adapting to the evolving circumstances and finding innovative ways to express dissent, advocate for change, and address pressing social issues²³.

Transformation in Light of Economic Collapse

The economic crisis further intensified the urgency for activism. The socio-economic challenges faced by Lebanese society have deepened inequalities, eroded livelihoods, and highlighted systemic injustices²⁴. As a result, activism has diversified its focus, expanding beyond traditional issues to encompass broader concerns. Activists have bridged diverse social groups and interests to address the multifaceted repercussions of the crisis and advocate for inclusive solutions²⁵.

Youth Activism

The activism landscape in Lebanon has witnessed a notable surge in youth activism, with young activists playing a pivotal role in driving social and political change²⁶. One prominent example is the Minteshreen movement, where young individuals joined forces to voice their frustrations, demand accountability, and advocate for reforms to secure a better future for upcoming generations²⁷. The youth activists harnessed the power of social media to organize protests and engage in grassroots initiatives. Young demonstrators' activities included the "Thawra Trial" that prosecuted the corrupt,²⁸

distribution of food donations, and providing repair assistance post 4th of August blast²⁹. With their fresh perspectives, they pushed for the aspirations of their generation to be recognized through youth participation in the state.

Feminist Activism

The economic crisis galvanized the feminist movement in Lebanon, as women activists have rallied together to address long-standing gender inequalities. Concerns such as the right of Lebanese women to pass nationality and proper political participation "female quota"³⁰ were raised³¹. Add to that, legal problematics such as child custody in religious courts, fair divorce settlements, and child marriage have taken center stage³². Feminist activists have mobilized through advocacy campaigns and public demonstrations. This aimed to challenge discriminatory laws and practices and raise awareness about gender-based violence. By amplifying their voices and advocating for progressive reforms, the feminist movement in Lebanon has been instrumental in paving the way for more female parliamentary and ministerial representation³³.

Sexual Minorities' Rights

In Lebanon, sexual minorities have confronted obstacles through restrictions on their rights. The LGBTQ+ community has encountered crackdowns and limitations imposed on their gatherings and events, impeding their ability to assemble and advocate for their basic rights³⁴. The minister of interior issued the crackdown orders in cooperation with security forces to restrict this phenomenon that the order

23 A. Majzoub. **Lebanon's Protests are Far from Over**. Human Rights Watch. 2020.

24 M. Yacoubian. **Lebanon's Protests Take a Troubling Turn During Dire Financial Crisis**. United States Institute of Peace, 2020.

25 Human Rights Watch: **Lebanon Events of 2021**

26 M. Harb. **Youth in Lebanon: Policy Narratives, Attitudes, and Forms of Mobilization**. Arab Center Washington DC. 2021.

27 "Our unity is the beginning of change": Six opposition groups join forces for legislative elections. L'Orient Today, 2022.

28 «محكمة الثورة» تصدر حكمها الجمهوريّة. بالصور- في اليوم الـ25.. Pictures - On the 25th day.. "The Revolutionary Court" issues its ruling. Al-Jumhuriya.

29 "Minteshreen" are providing food donations and aiding repairs following Beirut port, Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2020.

30 L. Alameddine. **Towards gender equality**, L'Orient Today, 2023.

31 Lebanon: **Discriminatory Nationality Law - Grant Lebanese Women's Children, Spouses Citizenship Rights**, 2018.

32 L. Fakhri, **Lebanon's Women Have Fought for Change – and Should Get It**, Human Rights Watch, 2019.

33 M. El Chamaa. **Meet the eight women elected to Parliament in 2022**, L'Orient Today, 2022.

34 R. Younes, **Lebanon is No Longer a Safe Haven for Activism**, Human Rights Watch, 2019.

considers unethical³⁵. These restrictions have created a hostile environment, thus leading to impeding the visibility and recognition of sexual minorities and limiting their opportunities for dialogue and activism. Despite these obstacles, LGBTQ+ activists and allies have persevered, organizing smaller-scale assemblies, utilizing digital platforms, and working towards creating safe spaces for their community³⁶. Their efforts aim to challenge societal norms, combat discrimination, and advocate for equal rights and inclusivity for sexual orientations and gender identities in Lebanon.

Refugees and Vulnerable Groups

Lebanon's refugee population and vulnerable groups have encountered systemic obstacles impaired by the state's mismanagement of their affairs³⁷. The large influx of refugees strained resources and infrastructure, leading to inadequate support and services for those in need. Such poor governance led to the marginalization and exclusion of refugees, making them more vulnerable to economic hardships³⁸.

In addition, the "Kafala" system, which governs the employment of migrant domestic workers, has perpetuated the exploitation and mistreatment of this vulnerable working group. It ties the legal status and employment of domestic workers to their employers, forming an imbalanced power dynamic³⁹. This, in turn, increases their vulnerability to various forms of abuse. This includes long working hours, wage withholding, physical and psychological abuse.

Organizations and activists have advocated for the rights and well-being of refugees and vulnerable groups⁴⁰. Their efforts focus on spreading awareness, providing essential services, and calling for contractual policy reforms⁴¹.

Depositors Rights

Rights-based activism has witnessed a surge, with a particular focus on depositors who were severely impacted by the collapse of the currency and the banking sector. In response to the financial crisis, several activist associations emerged to protect and raise awareness their concerns. Notable movements are Depositor's Union and Depositor's Association, as both are dedicated to advocating for the rights and interests of depositors affected by the economic collapse⁴².

These organizations played a crucial role in defending rights of depositors and organizing demonstrations at the Central Bank. They called for transparency in banking practices such as haircuts and transactions, and the implementation of adequate reforms to retrieve people's deposits⁴³. Through their mobilization and advocacy efforts, these activists strive to ensure that depositors' rights are protected, and their voices are heard in shaping policies and regulations related to the banking sector.

35 Lebanon: **Unlawful Crackdown on LGBTI Gatherings**, Human Rights Watch, 2022.

36 W. Christou. **Lebanese Civil Society Groups Condemn Anti-LGBT Crackdown**, The New Arab, 2022.

37 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/lebanon>

38 C. Brun, A. Fakih, M. Shuayb, M. & Hammoud, **The Economic Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon What It Means for Current Policies**, 2021, p. 13.

39 **ALEF. Protection Framework Towards Increased Protection for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon Protection Framework**, 2019, p. 13.

40 **F. Abdel Jawad, Lebanon Crises Increase Suffering of Migrant Domestic Workers**, UN News, 2021.

41 End Kafala: **Justice for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon**, Amnesty, 2019.

42 N. Maucourant Atallah, Society. **L'Orient Today**. 2022.

43 **Lebanon Economic Monitor the Deliberate Depression**. In World Bank. 2020, p. 12.

Retirees' Rights

The economic collapse in Lebanon has played a crucial role in shaping the emergence of activism focused on the rights of army and security retirees. The dire financial situation and the challenges faced by these retirees due to the devaluation of the currency and the banking sector's deterioration have highlighted the urgent need for action⁴⁴. Retirees in the military and security forces have mobilized efforts to address the unique struggles related to their devalued income as of the currency peg, advocating for improved benefits and comprehensive support systems⁴⁵. Thus, the economic crisis has been a catalyst for the development of this aspect of activism, bringing attention to the rights and well-being of army and security retirees.

Shifts in Activism: Impact of Pandemic Related Restrictions

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented legal restrictions on public gatherings and movements, challenging the traditional modes of activism rooted in physical protests. However, rather than stifling activism, the limitations sparked a creative response, prompting activists to explore alternative methods to voice their concerns and engage with broader audiences. The virtual realm became a vital space for activism, with online campaigns, social media mobilization, and digital advocacy gaining prominence as avenues for civic engagement⁴⁶.

44 L. Dayekh, Crisis and Retirement: **Elderly in the Public Sector are struggling to secure their needs**. Civil Society Knowledge Centre. 2022.

45 **Facing economic hardship, Lebanese military retirees take to the street**, The Arab Weekly, 2003.

46 M. Kranz. Coronavirus forces Lebanese protesters into new posture. Al-Monitor: **Independent, Trusted Coverage of the Middle East**, 2020.

The Transition from Centralized to Decentralized Activism: Adaptation to Crisis and COVID-19 Restrictions

Pre-Crisis Activism: Centralized Demonstrations

During the protests in Beirut's Martyr's Square in 2019, a remarkable aspect was the convergence of individuals from various cities across Lebanon. Protesters from the south, the north, and the mountains came together, transcending regional boundaries and demonstrating a unified voice for their cause⁴⁷. This collective gathering served as a powerful display of centralized activism⁴⁸.

The Lebanese protesters utilized various tools of demonstration during their activism. They employed peaceful gatherings, marches, and tents as powerful means to express their dissent and convey their demands⁴⁹. These physical forms of protest were accompanied by vibrant chants, anti-government slogans "all of them means all of them", and banners that captured the spirit and message of the movement⁵⁰.

A notable example was the formation of a human chain that spanned from the south in Tyre to the north in Tripoli passing in Beirut⁵¹. This symbolic gesture represented the unity of the Lebanese people across different regions in their protest participation. Furthermore, renowned Lebanese revolutionists like Marcel Khalife performed in Saida, showcasing the power of music and culture in inspiring and mobilizing the masses⁵². Another strategy

employed by the activists was the organization of "the revolution" bus trips, enabling protesters from various cities and towns to continue their demonstrations in Beirut⁵³.

The Crisis and Covid-19 Restrictions

The deterioration of the economic situation further compounded the challenges faced by activists. The currency peg collapsed, leading to a sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound. As a result, fuel and gas prices skyrocketed, making mobility of people to Beirut increasingly difficult, where many demonstrations were taking place. This economic turmoil severely hindered the mobility and ability of individuals to participate in activism, as the cost of transportation became prohibitive⁵⁴.

Additionally, COVID-19 outbreak added another layer of constraints on activism. The government enforced various constraints known as "general mobilization" to control the spread of the virus, including lockdowns, curfews, and limitations on public gatherings⁵⁵. These measures inhibited the freedom to movement and the right to peaceful assembly. This made it challenging for activists to physically gather and express their grievances in public spaces⁵⁶.

Transitioning to Decentralized Activism

In this context, activism had to adapt to these challenges and find alternative ways to express opposition, communicate concerns, and call for change. The dynamics of activism in Lebanon underwent a significant transformation, shifting from centralized to decentralized

47 Lebanon's October 2019 protests weren't just about the "WhatsApp tax.", Amnesty International, 2020.

48 Urban Revolutions: Lebanon's October 2019 Uprising - Spotlight On Urban Revolts, 2020.

49 K. Chehayeb, Beirut's Protest City Is a Rebuke to the Privatization of Public Space, Bloomberg, 2019.

50 "All of them means all of them": Lebanon protest slogans, 2019.

51 Guardian staff reporter. Protesters form human chain across Lebanon, The Guardian. 2019.

52 Ongoing Post on Protests in Beirut/Lebanon, 2019.

53 Activists Innovate "Revolution's Bus" Symbolic of Unity, Nahar Net. 2019.

54 R. Saleme, Transportation Costs Rise More Than 500 Percent Year-On-Year as Inflation Hits Consumers Across the Board, L'Orient Today, 2021.

55 Covid-19 and Social Control in Lebanon. SMEX. 2021.

56 E. Schoorel, M. Luitjens, & L. Van Der Reijden. The impact of COVID-19 on the revolutionary movement in Lebanon, 2020, p.3.

forms of mobilization⁵⁷. With the escalation of hyperinflation and the severe gas crisis, protests erupted in various regions across Lebanon, including Saida, Beqaa, Tripoli, Tyre, and mountainous towns. This decentralization of activism allowed for autonomous expressions of dissent and localized demands, as communities united to voice their grievances and seek solutions to their specific socio-economic challenges⁵⁸.

Alternative Means of Activism

COVID-19 restrictions propelled activism to adapt and find new avenues of engagement such as digital activism⁵⁹. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Clubhouse emerged as powerful tools for conducting digital meetings and discussions⁶⁰. Twitter hashtags gained prominence, enabling activists to reach a broader audience as more people turned to the internet for information and connection during the pandemic⁶¹. Lebanese activists utilized platforms like Zoom to facilitate virtual meetings with economic experts, anti-corruption advocates, and human rights defenders, creating spaces for knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising. In certain instances, the protestors organized car protests to voice their concerns in the midst of the collapse while still abiding by the lockdown rules.

Moreover, public figures and journalists played a crucial role in shaping the narrative and amplifying socio-economic concerns. As they were exempted from the lockdown measures, they continued to participate in live television programs, providing a platform for in-depth discussions on pressing issues. Their involvement helped elevate public discourse and draw attention to the socio-economic challenges faced by Lebanese society.

This transformative shift towards decentralized activism, coupled with the emergence of online engagement and the utilization of social media platforms, allowed for a broader and more diverse range of voices to participate in the advocacy for change.

57 Urban Revolutions: **Lebanon's October 2019 Uprising - Spotlight On Urban Revolts, 2020.**

58 V. Tin-bor Hui, A Leaderless Movement, or Leadership Decentralized but Coordinated? Department of Political Science, University of Notre Dame; **Department of Political Science. 2019.**

59 **B. Bringel, & G. Pleyers. Social Movements and Politics in a Global Pandemic. Policy Press. 2022.**

60 F. Al Mahmoud. **How Clubhouse is encouraging dialogue in Lebanon among citizens and politicians. The National, 2023.**

61 A. Siegel. How Lebanese Elites Coopt Protest Discourse: **A Social Media Analysis. In The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. 2021. p. 3.**

Lebanese State's Violations to Activism Fundamental Components

Freedom of movement holds significant constitutional and international legal importance in Lebanon. The constitutional's preamble recognizes this right and which emphasizes the principles of freedom and equality⁶². On an international level, Lebanon is a ratifying state of the ICCPR, which explicitly protects the fundamental liberty to movement as well.

Nonetheless, the imposition of pandemic restrictions, coupled with economic crisis implications, have resulted in violations of the rights to movement and peaceful assembly in Lebanon. These limitations significantly impeded people's ability to exercise their right to move freely within the country, hindering their participation in protests and demonstrations.

⁶² Lebanon's Constitution of 1926 with Amendments through 2004. Oxford University Press. 2022. p. 3.

INFLUENCE OF VIOLENCE ON ACTIVISM

The implications of the economic collapse in Lebanon have reverberated through various aspects of society, including activism, and have given rise to a concerning influence of violence. Perpetrated by state and non-state actors, violence has profoundly impacted the landscape of Lebanese activism. It constituted blatant violations of fundamental components for activism, i.e., freedom of speech and the right to peaceful assembly. The manifestations of the persecution impeded activists' ability to express dissent and advocate for change in a peaceful and inclusive manner⁶³.

Violence Perpetrated by the State

The measures enacted by the Lebanese government, in terms of crisis and pandemic mishandling, have taken their toll on citizen engagement in activism amidst deteriorating living standards. These implementations were attempts to contain the declining situation. However, they ended up committed violations in various forms.

Crisis and Collapse Mismanagement

The violations committed by the state in light of the protests were not only limited to assaulting protestors. They entailed governmental maladministration constituting a breach of the rights and well-being of the Lebanese nationals. The erosion of transparency, accountability, and good governance has created a climate of impunity, where the rights of individuals to fair and just treatment have been compromised⁶⁴.

Liquidity Crisis

The liquidity crisis in Lebanon is attributed to the Lebanese state's fiscal policies. These plans involved complex financial strategies that supposedly aimed to manage the country's fiscal challenges and debt burdens. However, the consequences became apparent as the Lebanese economy faced collapse, currency devaluation, and a subsequent banking liquidity crisis⁶⁵.

The banking insolvency was exacerbated by a currency peg and an alarming increase in the dollar exchange rate. As Lebanon heavily relies on resources derived from banking operations and is in a trade deficit, the repercussions were calamitous⁶⁶. Hyperinflation ensued as the scarcity of liquidity impaired the people's purchasing power for essential needs⁶⁷. Additionally, the prevailing conditions gave rise to a black market for the dollar, further influencing most sectors and intensifying the crisis.

As the currency faced sharp devaluation, most banks were deemed insolvent making it difficult for depositors to access their funds. Depositors, who constitute an abundance of Lebanese nationals⁶⁸, faced extreme restrictions on withdrawals, transfers, and conversions, leading to a loss of confidence in the banking sector⁶⁹. As a result, the state's failure in instituting adequate financial plans contributed to the eradication of the Lebanese middle class.

63 Lebanon: **Protect Protesters from Attacks**. Human Rights Watch, 2019.

64 B. Aboul-Nasr, **A year into mass protests, Lebanon's leaders must finally take action against corruption**, Transparency International UK, 2023.

65 **Lebanon Overview**, World Bank, 2022.

66 Lebanon: **Staff Concluding Statement of the 2023 Article IV Mission**, IMF, 2023.

67 ESCWA: **2 Arab Currencies Lost More Than 80% Of Their Purchasing Power Between 2019 and 2021**, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2019.

68 **59% OF LEBANESE ADULTS HAVE A BANK ACCOUNT AS PER BDL SIDE SURVEY FOR THE YEAR 2018**, Creditlibanais.com, 2018.

69 T. Gaspard, **TO BANK DEPOSITORS IN LEBANON (Confronting Banks, Banque du Liban, and Government)**, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022, P. 13, 14.

Multifaceted Influence

The Lebanese state and relevant authorities did not take the initiative to control the chaotic black market, thus deemed unable to curb the continuous rise in the dollar exchange rate. This exacerbation added further complexity to the crisis. Essential resources like fuel for electricity and private motor generators were predominantly purchased in dollars and from the black market, leading to a monopolization of these vital supplies for transportation and power generation⁷⁰. This resulted in prolonged power cuts lasting for weeks, as the state initially failed to provide an adequate supply of electricity.⁷¹ The Lebanese people, deprived from fundamental necessities, were also exploited by owners of private motor generators as they took part in monopolizing electricity supply.

In an attempt to mitigate the economic hardships, the central bank and government opted to provide subsidies funded by the depositors' money, despite restricting access to their own funds⁷². While these subsidies aimed to support the availability of essential goods such as fuel, medicine, and food products, monopolizing merchants took advantage of the situation. They purchased subsidized products from the state, stored them, and sold them at inflated prices in the black market, thereby undermining the intended benefits for the Lebanese people.

The electricity crisis had far-reaching implications across various sectors. The health sector struggled to provide adequate services due to frequent power cuts, compromising patient care and medical equipment functionality⁷³. Additionally, employees of the public sector, faced difficulties in carrying out their duties effectively without a stable electricity

supply and adequate pay. The education sector also suffered as power outages disrupted online learning platforms and hindered educational activities⁷⁴.

The combined effects of the subsidy system exploitation and the electricity crisis have intensified the challenges faced by the Lebanese population, impacting their daily lives, livelihoods, and access to essential services.

The Lebanese state's inaction to hold perpetrators accountable and exercise effective censorship over the situation has hindered the tracking them down. The lack of accountability and oversight has allowed those responsible for exacerbating the crisis to operate with impunity, evading legal consequences for their actions⁷⁵.

COVID-19 Outbreak Restrictions: Continuous Threat to the Lebanese

Amidst the Lebanese state's negligence in containing illicit practices within the black market, the restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have further violated the rights of the Lebanese people. As the challenges of medicine scarcity, electricity shortages, and failed subsidy plans persisted unresolved, the situation worsened. The monopolization of medication by pharmacists and merchants who hoarded subsidized medicines and sold them at inflated prices went unchecked due to inadequate subsidies and enforcement measures by the government. This exploitation left many individuals unable to afford essential medications, compromising their right to health and well-being⁷⁶.

70 **Cut Off From Life Itself, Human Rights Watch, 2023.**

71 **International Monetary Fund, Lebanon Selected Issues, IMF Country Report No.192019 ,313/, p. 2.**

72 J. Babin, Subsidies: **Are BDL's Mandatory Deposits Really Untouchable? L'Orient Today, 2020.**

73 F. El-Jardali, R. Fadlallah, R. Shaya, & R. Masri, Lebanon: **A Primary Health Care Case Study In The Context Of The COVID-19 Pandemic, PHC Case Study Lebanon, WHO EMRO (Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office). 2022. P. 8.**

74 **T. Ramadan, Pursuing Education In Lebanon In The Midst Of A Financial Crisis, Power Outages And Internet Disruptions L'Orient Today, 2021.**

75 Lebanon: **UN Expert Warns Of 'Failing State' Amid Widespread Poverty, OHCHR, 2022.**

76 Lebanon: **Government Recklessness In Medication Subsidy Reform Violates Right To Health And Life, Amnesty International, 2021.**

Additionally, amidst the outbreak, the inadequacy of governmental hospitals became evident, as there were shortages of ICU beds due to improper planning and funding⁷⁷. The state's response to the pandemic included tightening COVID-19 measures, such as imposing lockdowns and restricting the movements of protestors advocating for improved living standards⁷⁸. This further weakened the essence of activism and violated the Lebanese people's rights to livelihood in various ways. These combined factors have resulted in a significant infringement upon the rights of the Lebanese population especially the right to health and life, undermining their well-being and access to essential services in the midst of a challenging crisis.

Part of the pandemic related actions was The Lebanese government's establishment of IMPACT platform to enhance their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. IMPACT has played a crucial role in managing various COVID-related services online, such as issuing mobility permits during lockdowns and facilitating vaccination registration⁷⁹. However, the way the Lebanese state managed nationals' data on the platform has raised concerns about potential privacy violations and non-compliance with the GDPR. The platform's privacy policy was troublesome as it lacks clarity on how data is processed and fails to specify how long personal information is retained, going against both the GDPR and Lebanese law no. 81/2018⁸⁰. Moreover, individuals' data protection privacy rights are undermined by the absence of the right to file a complaint with a supervisory authority⁸¹. Additionally, the platform's technical vulnerabilities, such as outdated encryption protocols and the risk of clickjacking attacks, put users' data privacy and security at risk⁸². These complications, coupled with the Lebanese

state's negligence in addressing them, highlight the potential for privacy breaches and infringement on the rights of Lebanese citizens, as outlined by the GDPR.

Overall, the convergence of COVID-19 restrictions, the economic crisis, and the intensified struggles faced by the Lebanese people have had a detrimental impact on activism in the country. The burdens placed upon individuals due to the pandemic and the deteriorating socio-economic conditions have diminished their capacity to engage in effective advocacy and protest for better living standards.

State and Culture Sponsored Gender Based Violations

The strict lockdown measures imposed during the economic crisis have adversely affected sexual minorities in Lebanon. Already facing societal and familial rejection, these individuals have become further marginalized and isolated⁸³. Safe spaces for this community such as coffeeshops and pubs have been closed, thus depriving them of support and a sense of belonging⁸⁴. Moreover, vulnerable groups like domestic workers are at increased risk of abuse at home during the lockdowns. The state's failure to consider challenges faced by these communities reflects a disregard for their safety and well-being.

Furthermore, the strict lockdowns have exacerbated the challenges faced by women, particularly those living with abusive partners. Lebanese provisions in Islamic family laws contain problematic provisions that may tolerate abusive behavior from husbands, making it difficult for women to report and seek help⁸⁵. With limited the inability to leave their homes

77 G. Azar, **Demand For Icus Rises, But Beds Are Hard To Find As The COVID-19 Surge Persists**, *L'Orient Today*, 2021.

78 L. Safwan, "Is the Lebanese government using COVID-19 to undermine protests?," *Timep.org*, 2020.

79 <https://impact.cib.gov.lb/home>

80 **Is Lebanese Citizens' Data Safe On IMPACT's Platforms?**, *SMEEX*, 2021.

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

83 B. Samneh, and C. Maydaa, "In Lebanon, COVID-19 and LGBTQ: Struggle Magnified," *The MENA Chronicle | Fanack*, 2020.

84 *Ibid.*

85 **Unequal and Unprotected Women's Rights under Lebanese Personal Status Laws**, *Human Rights Watch*, 2015.

freely, women have been trapped in abusive situations, further compromising their safety and well-being⁸⁶. The state's failure to address these issues within the framework of the lockdown measures highlights a systemic failure to protect and empower women in Lebanon.

For instance, Shaden Fakih's comedic phone call for sanitary pads during the COVID lockdown was met with the Lebanese state's abuse, as she was subjected to military court investigations simply for inquiring about access to pads during strict measures⁸⁷. This violation highlights the state's disregard for women's rights and freedom to express female related concerns that the state disregards.

Amidst hyperinflation in Lebanon, the state's violation of women's rights becomes evident in the rise of period poverty. Despite the economic crisis and soaring prices of sanitary pads, the government failed to include them as essential goods, in stark contrast to the subsidies provided for men's razors and cashews in the "food basket"⁸⁸. This disregard for female necessities puts women's health at risk and exacerbates the challenges faced by those struggling to afford menstrual products. The state's failure to address period poverty highlights the urgent need for comprehensive measures to ensure access to affordable and hygienic menstrual products for all women in Lebanon.

State Security and Military Forces Brutality

During the 2019 protests in Lebanon, there were instances of security and military forces' brutality. Clashes with demonstrators became more frequent and vicious. Reports and video evidence documented excessive use of force, including the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons, and batons against peaceful protesters⁸⁹. The response from security forces escalated tensions as it led to injuries and arrests⁹⁰. The inflicted violence by the state on unarmed protestors was widely condemned by human rights organizations and activists, as this raised concerns about the protection of civil liberties and the right to peaceful assembly⁹¹.

Amidst liquidity scarcity, Lebanese students, for instance, actively participated in expressing their concerns, particularly regarding the dollarization of tuitions. However, their activism was met with excessive force and abuses by internal security forces, and this was evident in the American University of Beirut student protests⁹². Students faced physical assaults, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation by internal security forces.

86 J. Usta, H. Murr, and R. El-Jarrah, "COVID-19 Lockdown and the Increased Violence Against Women: Understanding Domestic Violence During a Pandemic," *Violence and Gender*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2021, P. 134. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2020.0069>.

87 Lebanon: *End Military Trial Against Comedian And Drop All Charges*, Amnesty International, 2022.

88 M. Ibrahim, *The Rise of Period Poverty in Lebanon*, Human Rights Pulse, 2021.

89 ALEF, & PAX, *LEBANON Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review Thirty-seventh session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council*, 2020, p. 10.

90 Lebanon: *Military and Security Forces Attack Unarmed Protesters Following Explosions – New Testimony*, Amnesty International, 2020.

91 Lebanon: *Lethal Force Used Against Protesters*, Human Rights Watch, 2020.

92 "Lebanon police clash with students protesting tuition fee hike," *Middle East Monitor*, 2020.

Another example is following the port explosion in Beirut on August 4th, 2020, which caused immense destruction and the death of more than 220 people. Protests erupted in Beirut demanding accountability and justice. However, security and military forces responded to these protests with excessive force and brutality. Unarmed demonstrators were subjected to physical assaults, tear gas, rubber bullets and pellets fired indiscriminately by parliamentary security forces⁹³. This is a demonstration of how the Lebanese state violated international guidelines with regards to containing conflict⁹⁴.

In the Lebanese context, violations to these fundamental liberties have been demonstrated in various forms including excessive use of force against protestors, arbitrary arrests, limitations on transparency and accountability. These violations are deemed incompatible with Lebanon's obligations under the ICCPR and the interpretations provided by the OHCHR.

Breaches to International Human Rights

The Lebanese government has undoubtedly put the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech at stake. The Lebanese state, as an ICCPR ratifying party, is obligated to safeguard these fundamental rights for activism.

The OHCHR provides authoritative interpretations of Articles 19 and 21 of the ICCPR through its general comments. It is imperative that freedom of expression entails the right to impart information, seek, receive, and convey ideas and opinions of all kinds with no frontiers⁹⁵. Noteworthy, the OHCHR stresses that the limitations on the right to peaceful assembly have to be exceptional, necessary, and proportionate⁹⁶.

93 A. Majzoub, "Lebanon Police Force Directs Blame for Abuse Against Protesters," Human Rights Watch, 2020.

94 **United Nations Human Rights Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement, The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2019.**

95 General comment No.34 on Article 19: **Freedoms of opinion and expression,** OHCHR, 2023.

96 **Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 37 (2020) On The Right Of Peaceful Assembly (Article 21), United Nations CCPR/C/GC/37 International Covenant On Civil And Political Rights, 2020. P. 6,7.**

Violence Committed by Non-State Actors

Political Parties Supporters

During the protests in Lebanon, clashes erupted between supporters of political parties and the protesters who were expressing their discontent with the policies and measures of the ruling class. One significant location of these confrontations was the Ring bridge in Beirut, where protesters voiced their strong dissatisfaction⁹⁷. Incidents of violence occurred as supporters of political parties, including the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, assaulted and clashed with the protesters in that area⁹⁸. Additionally, the protesters' tents in downtown Beirut were destroyed, and acts of vandalism targeted symbols of the protest movement, such as the burning of the "revolution fist" monument by individuals aligned with political parties⁹⁹. These events reflected the tensions and confrontations between different factions in Lebanon during the protests.

Furthermore, alongside the clashes between political party supporters and protesters, there were also incidents where certain religious groups confronted the demonstrations. In the predominantly Achrafieh district, a group known as the Soldiers of God, which advocates for socially conservative values and laws, tore down a billboard promoting events for Pride month.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, conflicts between feminist movement and the Islamic Group in Saida over public beach access highlighted the hindrances faced by activism¹⁰¹. These clashes reflected opposing views on women's rights and societal norms, illustrating the cultural challenges encountered in advocating for gender equality. Such conflicts underscored the complex dynamics within

Lebanese society, where differing ideologies clashed and impeded progress in promoting personal freedoms and social change.

These confrontations highlighted the deep divisions and conflicts that existed within Lebanese society during the protests, with tensions not only between political factions but also between different religious and social groups.

Social and Cultural Violence Against Women

In Lebanon, the struggle for women's rights is compounded by societal and cultural barriers that hinder gender equality. While there is a movement led by women advocating for change, the broader society often fails to fully uphold the rights of women. One area of concern is the need for reforms within religious courts, for instance in relation to child custody matters in the Jaafari Shia courts¹⁰². The existing system prolongs gender-based inequalities.

One instance is the case of Nadine Jouni with regards to child custody at religious courts¹⁰³. Under the prevailing laws at the religious Shia courts, custody of children in cases of divorce is usually granted to fathers at a young age. Consequently, Nadine lost custody of her son and was given limited visitation rights of only 24 hours per week. Despite efforts to challenge these laws through online campaigns and protests, she was unable to obtain full custody before her death in a car accident¹⁰⁴. This example highlights the discriminatory nature of the personal status laws in Lebanon, particularly with regard to child custody rights, and the impact they have on women's rights.

97 M. CHAHINE, Khandak el-Ghamik: **the other side of the thawra**, L'Orient Today, 2019.

98 **Amal and Hezbollah supporter's sit-in at the Ring Bridge and clash with protesters**, Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2019.

99 **Vandals Set Fire to Symbol of Lebanon's Revolution**, The New Arab, 2019.

100 **In Lebanon, 'Soldiers of God' Threaten the LGBT Community And Condemn Civil Marriage**, The Observers - France 24, 2022.

101 **Opposing Demonstrations Held In Saida After Beachgoers Harassed**, L'Orient Today, 2023.

102 Lebanon: **Laws Discriminate Against Women**, Human Rights Watch, 2015.

103 M. Fam, **"In Death And Life, Lebanese Woman Shows Religious Law Fight,"** AP NEWS, 2021.

104 Ibid.

Another aspect of social and cultural violence against women in Lebanon relates to the disparity in divorce rights. Women often face significant hurdles in obtaining a divorce, while men enjoy greater legal privileges and authority in marital matters in Islamic courts¹⁰⁵. This imbalance perpetuates gender-based inequalities and denies women the autonomy and freedom to file for divorce. Moreover, there is a lack of clarity regarding the legal age for female marriage, as religious laws do not explicitly prohibit early marriages¹⁰⁶. This ambiguity leaves young girls vulnerable to forced and underage marriages, compromising their well-being and future prospects.

Addressing these social and cultural issues requires a comprehensive effort to challenge patriarchal norms, advocate for legal reforms, and promote gender equality in the Lebanese society.

Emergence of Digital Violence

Digital violence in Lebanon has become a concerning issue, particularly since 2019. This form encompasses various harmful behavior, such as cyberbullying targeted at reporters and individuals¹⁰⁷. Social media platforms have been used as tools for spreading derogatory hashtags and engaging in online harassment, “#Dima_el_Watyeh” (#دِيمَا_الوَاطِيَّة) for instance, directed at journalist and reporter Dima Sadek¹⁰⁸. Moreover, gender-based slurs and slut shaming have been more prevalent, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and demeaning women¹⁰⁹. Such behavior of digital violence taking place poses significant threats to the well-being and dignity of individuals, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and effective legal measures to address and prevent such abuses.

105 Unequal and Unprotected Women's Rights under Lebanese Personal Status Laws, **Human Rights Watch, 2015**.

106 Unequal and Unprotected Women's Rights under Lebanese Personal Status Laws, *Ibid*.

107 The Chilling: **A global study of online violence against women journalists, International Center for Journalists, 2022, p. 53**.

108 *Ibid*.

109 *Ibid*, p. 67, 69.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ICT-related violence has not only stifled digital activism but also obstructed the progress of promoting online spaces as inclusive, safe, and empowering for individuals to express themselves and advocate for their rights¹¹⁰.

Despite Lebanon being a ratifying state to prominent human rights conventions such as the ICCPR, a binding international instrument of the UDHR which Lebanon also participated in drafting and voted in favor of, its practices have been proven to be problematic. Violations of numerous rights have been observed, including the right to property, as seen in the hardships faced by depositors in accessing their funds due to the financial collapse and mismanagement of the banking sector¹¹¹. The right to education has been hindered by the economic crisis and COVID-19 restrictions by the state, impacting students' access to quality education and resources¹¹². The right to a fair trial has been undermined in cases like that of Shaden and women struggling with child custody¹¹³. Moreover, the right to privacy has been violated through mishandling of personal data on IMPACT platform, raising privacy and data protection concerns¹¹⁴. The right to social, economic, and cultural rights has been breached, with the Lebanese encountering low living standards and being prohibited basic needs resulting from the state's financial policies¹¹⁵.

These violations have become a form of violence as they underscore the urgent need for the Lebanese state to protect the human rights of its citizens. Hence, this shall ensure their well-being and upholding their inherent dignity as guaranteed by international conventions.

The key components for activism, including the right to movement, peaceful assembly, and freedom of speech have been compromised in Lebanon, as their exercise has been impeded by the state. It's imperative that the government implements proactive measures to safeguard fundamental rights by promoting transparency and accountability in addressing state concerns. Holding both state and non-state actors accountable for persecution is essential for establishing a just and equitable society. Ensuring the protection of these rights fosters an environment favorable for citizen engagement in activism. By safeguarding the protection of fundamental rights, Lebanon can better foster a society that upholds the principles of democracy, equality, and human dignity.

110 Violence against women in the online space: **insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States,** UN Women – Arab States, 2023.

111 **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 17, United Nations.**

112 Ibid, Article 26.

113 Ibid, Article 10.

114 **What is GDPR, the EU's new data protection law? - GDPR. 2018.**

115 **Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, OHCHR, 2023.**

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