

Lebanese politicians split over economic rescue efforts

Tue, 2020-04-14 00:20

BEIRUT: Lebanese politicians are divided on how to best rescue the country's economy, which has been in freefall for months.

Parties disagree about the implementation of reforms requested by foreign countries in order to provide support.

The coalition government was formed in January after almost 100 days of widespread public protests about the state of the economy, corruption, high unemployment and a lack of basic services. The majority of ministers belong to Hezbollah and its allies.

Opposition parties, especially the Future Movement headed by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, object to the way the government is dealing with the country's financial freefall.

Hezbollah and the Amal Movement oppose an IMF bailout, which could be a way to ease the crisis.

One suggestion, from the Lazar Financial Advisory Company, proposed a plan on ways to develop the Lebanese economy. It advised the government to confiscate bank deposits in return for shares to depositors, in addition to other measures related to the banking sector.

FASTFACT

Lebanese people stood on their balconies on Sunday and sang the national anthem ahead of the 45th anniversary of the civil war.

But the grand mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian, the highest religious authority of the Sunni community in Lebanon, rejected the idea. "We must take lessons from the experiences that the country has gone through," he said. "What we are witnessing now in Lebanon is an economic war to illegally take away people's bank deposits, while on the other hand there is public money that was looted and we know nothing about it ... citizens should not be the victims."

Dr. Tariq Majzoub, the minister of education and higher education, said that Lebanon was facing a great ordeal as a result of the influence of "particular interests over the supreme public interest."

The squabbling came as Lebanese people emerged from their homes on Sunday evening to stand on their balconies and sing the national anthem ahead of the 45th anniversary of the civil war. The civil war started on April 13, 1975, and lasted for 15 years.

NGO Farah Al-Ataa urged people to go to their balconies because April 13 was behind them and they should unite for a better Lebanon.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Lazar Financial Advisory Company proposes a plan on ways to develop the Lebanese economy. It advises the government to confiscate bank deposits in return for shares to depositors, in addition to other measures related to the banking sector. But the grand mufti rejects the idea.
- Lebanese education minister says the country is facing a great ordeal as a result of the influence of 'particular interests over the supreme public interest.'

But political activist Dr. Ziad Abdel Samad said Lebanese society did not share the same perception about the war's outcome. "Within the war generation there are those who got the lesson and want to build a civil state, and those who insist on committing the same mistakes," he told Arab News. The political elite was not ready to relinquish its interests and gains, he added, and its practices were no better than those who were in power during the war. "It will not relinquish these gains and its performance proves that. It obstructed judicial reforms because it wants to keep its control over the judiciary, for it does not want to tackle the issue of looted money, nor to set a regulating authority for electricity."

Within the war generation, there are those who want to build a civil state, and those who insist on committing the same mistakes.

Dr. Ziad Abdel Samad, Lebanese political activist

Protests have stopped because of a coronavirus lockdown, with people only allowed out for essential purposes. There are also severe restrictions on movement.

Samad said more pressure was needed and that people would have to wait for a new wave of revolution. "This time it will be different and I hope that it does not turn violent. The people who protested in the streets are waiting for the actions and reforms of the new government, but it seems that those in power did not learn the lesson."



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Lebanon puts Bcharri town under lockdown as stranded nationals return

[Turkish interior minister's rejected resignation hints at deepened rifts](#)

Tue, 2020-04-14 00:14

ANKARA: The shocking resignation of Turkey's contentious Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu on late Sunday has revealed the ongoing rifts within the Turkish government regarding measures taken against the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

But his resignation, which was rejected by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is especially crucial considering the political risk he could pose to the president's leadership.

Soylu, who has been in his post since 2016, resigned after the panic sparked by Friday's abrupt announcement of a two-day curfew in 31 cities soon before midnight.

He asked for forgiveness for the crisis management failure as crowds rushed to bakeries, gas stations and groceries despite social distancing measures – a move that was harshly criticized by opposition parties.

Taking responsibility for the chaos on Friday night, his unconventional self-critical statement is rare for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), where almost nobody resigns by admitting a political mistake.

"Emerging consensus is that Soylu's resignation was more of a preemptive strike against his enemies who wanted him to be sacked by Erdogan over the curfew fiasco," political analyst Amberin Zaman tweeted.

As one of Erdogan's closest confidants, the resignation of Soylu demonstrated intra-government frictions and hinted at the need for managing deepened battles within the state apparatus amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

Soylu has reportedly been at loggerheads with Erdogan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, who is the finance minister. Daily Sabah, a Turkish newspaper owned by a businessman close to Albayrak, tweeted that he resigned over "botched" announcement of curfew Friday night after which 250,000 people flooded shops and bakeries.

For some other analysts, Erdogan made a tough choice regarding this resignation because if he accepted this decision, Soylu might establish his own party or join another nationalist party within the parliament, further weakening the ruling party.

The AKP has already lost a significant part of its constituency after two other breakaway factions were formed within the last year.

Before joining the AKP, Soylu was also known for his harsh criticisms of Erdogan. Being originally from the Black Sea region and seen by many as a possible successor to Erdogan, he has his own power base with the backing of several Islamist and nationalistic segments of Turkish society.

In northern city of Rize, considered a bastion of the AKP, a citizen threatened to commit suicide over his resignation but decided not to after police convinced him that the resignation wasn't accepted. Crowds in Istanbul's conservative neighborhoods also celebrated Erdogan's decision to reject the resignation with car convoys and whistles.

Soylu tweeted that he was humbled by support of the nation and president, and pledged to "continue work in the service of the nation" in his first statement after the incident.

Soner Cagaptay, author of "Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East," said that Erdogan's policies have been guided since 2013 by a philosophy which he borrowed from Islamist thinker Necip Fazil Kısakurek, who once said: "Don't let a brick fall off the defensive wall."

Cagaptay told Arab News: "His ministers serve until Erdogan fires them. If he lets one minister resign for a failure of duties, he has to face a barrage of requests for others to resign, so better to keep everybody in their position."

Cagaptay said this resignation is a sign of deep divisions inside the Palace, but Erdogan ultimately would not allow them to surface and he will not let any other ministers to resign from now on.

"If he allows anyone to leave, his entire cabinet and himself could come under fire. The winner yesterday was Erdogan's survival instincts for not letting a brick fall off the wall," he added.

Transport Minister Cahit Turhan was recently removed from his post following criticism for holding a tender for the Canal Istanbul megaproject amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

"For some time, there were intra-party factional fights between groups linked to Albayrak and Soylu as the two most powerful ministers in the cabinet.

“Soylu’s resignation is a sign that these rifts could no longer be suppressed amid the worsening COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey, especially in light of the curfew controversy on Friday evening,” Berk Esen, a political analyst from Ankara’s Bilkent University, told Arab News.

“Soylu may have preempted strong criticism coming from his rivals by resigning to compel Erdogan to declare support for his interior minister, lest Erdogan risk creating a political crisis,” he said.

He added that Soyulu has a strong base within the state security apparatus and enjoys high popularity in nationalist circles – including the AKP’s main political ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – due to his aggressive tactics against the pro-Kurdish HDP.

“With Erdogan’s open support on Sunday evening, Soyulu has elevated himself above all other cabinet ministers and strengthened his position immensely. He is now a force to be reckoned with and demonstrated that he has the support of the MHP.

“The pandemic has already uprooted Turkish politics and will probably weaken the AKP in the coming weeks. Whether or not Soyulu can spare himself from the crisis is to be seen,” Esen said.



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Gulf Air to repatriate stranded Bahrainis from Iran

Author:

Mon, 2020-04-13 21:47

DUBAI: Bahrain said on Monday that state-owned Gulf Air has begun flying to Iran to repatriate Bahrainis stranded there due to the coronavirus crisis, the first direct flights between the two countries in four years.

More than a thousand Bahrainis, most of them pilgrims visiting Shi'ite Muslim religious sites, have been stranded for more than two months in the Islamic Republic, which is the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in the Middle East.

There have been no direct flights since January 2016 between Bahrain and Iran, which have no diplomatic ties and long-standing differences. Manama alleges Tehran has stoked unrest in the island state, a charge Iran denies.

Bahrain, which has recorded 1,348 coronavirus cases and six related deaths, has struggled to find other airlines willing to fly to Iran and has managed to repatriate only a few hundred people, prompting criticism by some citizens.

Bahrain's initial cases of the coronavirus were among Bahrainis returning from Iran via third countries, which caused Manama to rebuke Tehran over not stamping their passports.

"Gulf Air has begun operating direct flights to Iran to expedite the safe return of citizens," Bahrain's government said in a statement.

Gulf Air cancelled most of its services in mid-March due to the spread of the virus, but is still flying to and from London, Paris, Frankfurt and Manila, the statement said.

The airline has carried out repatriation flights from the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey, it added.

Other Gulf Arab states are using their national carriers to bring citizens back home.

Kuwait said on Monday it would start another repatriation process next week for 50,000 Kuwaitis around the world. Last month Kuwait said it had flown home more than 2,700 citizens.



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Bahrain's Gulf Air suspends dozens of routes due to coronavirus196 Saudis stranded in Bahrain over coronavirus pandemic return home

[Gaza opens Egypt crossing to returnees despite virus](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2020-04-13 16:15

RAFAH: Gaza's Hamas-run government on Monday temporarily re-opened the border crossing with Egypt, shut due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, to allow hundreds of Palestinians to return.

One-way traffic into the coastal enclave through the Rafah crossing would be allowed for the coming four days, Gaza's interior ministry said.

All those returning would be put into compulsory 21-day quarantine which

could be extended, interior ministry spokesman Iyad Al-Bozm said.

So far, only 13 COVID-19 infections have been confirmed in Gaza, all from people returning to the territory or those in contact with them while in quarantine.

But the Strip, under an Israeli-imposed blockade since 2007, is one of the most densely-populated territories on earth and has a struggling health system.

Hamas has imposed a series of measures including closing markets, schools and mosques.

Gaza, ruled by the Islamist group since 2007, had run out of COVID-19 testing kits last week but the World Health Organization delivered 480 kits on Sunday.

At the Rafah arrivals hall on Monday, returning residents were met by dozens of police officers, doctors and nurses wearing protective medical equipment. Among the returnees were students and people who had been outside Gaza for treatment for other diseases, said doctor Mohamed Abu Salamieh.

The Rafah border crossing with Egypt is the only exit from Gaza apart from into Israel.





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Israeli casualties in a bomb explosion at the border fence with Rafah in Gaza

[Amid silent Easter, Aoun says: Never give in to the culture of death](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-04-12 23:07

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun abided by the government's decision to enforce social distancing on Easter and did not attend the traditional mass held in Bkerke, the episcopal see of the Maronite Church in Lebanon.

Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi performed mass with a few priests, which was broadcast on television.

Aoun called on the Lebanese people "not to give in to the culture of death and its repercussions."

He added: "This shared suffering must bear the fruit of spiritual solidarity and effective values with which our country will be renewed to move forward, proud of all its people regardless of their affiliations, towards the horizons of life after having recovered from its pain."

Lebanon enforced a curfew on Sunday to stop the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

The Ministry of Health sent out awareness messages through traditional and social media, calling on people to stay home and warning of a fine of 50,000 liras (\$33) in cases of violation.

Health Minister Hamad Hassan said that Lebanon is containing the pandemic given the non-dramatic daily rise in the number of COVID-19 cases.

The Ministry of Health announced in its daily report on Sunday 11 new confirmed cases, bringing the total number in Lebanon since the discovery of the first case on Feb. 21 to 630 cases.

69 percent of the cases are mild and moderate, while 22 percent have shown no symptoms and 9 percent are critical. A noticeable increase in the number of cases in the isolated town of Bsharri has been recorded. As of Sunday, the number of cases has reached 56, an increase of one new case.

The number of tests performed on people in Lebanon has reached 12,713.

The Ministry of Health highlighted that the tests performed on the Lebanese expatriates who returned on Saturday yielded negative results. These include 123 Lebanese people who have returned from Kuwait, 126 from Dubai, 148 from Lunda and 122 from Rome.

The ministry stressed that the returnees must commit to home quarantine and must be monitored daily by the ministry.

As in other countries, there is panic towards people who may have the disease, their families and those who were asked to self-isolate to make sure they have not caught COVID-19. Ostracism is affecting vulnerable groups.

A taxi driver, who is a Palestinian refugee in Tire, has undergone a test after his flu symptoms raised concerns in Burj El-Shimali camp. The Palestinian National Security Forces, the Palestinian Civil Defence, committees and the security forces transferred him to Al-Hamshari Hospital in Sidon, quarantined all members of his family, and kept track of all the people with whom he came in contact. The director of the hospital, Riad Abu Al-Einen, announced that the test result was negative, but the patient was asked to commit to home quarantine for 14 days and to have his health monitored daily.

Matn district in Mount Lebanon continues to be one of the areas with the highest number of cases, with the mayor, Marilyn Haddad, said that "the virus can infect any of us, so patients cannot be ostracized or treated in a negative way – this is to protect their human dignity."

Haddad called on the residents of Matn to “look out for one another without causing harm” and to continue to perform humanitarian work under the slogan “together we serve without discrimination.”

Dr. Ahmed Al-Maghrabi, a psychologist and social health doctor, told Arab News: “COVID-19 has caused mass panic everywhere in the world that reaction to the disease is no longer innocent. People hear news of the disease killing 2,000 people per day. This causes panic and justifies it, but what cannot be justified is treating patients like killers. The epidemic is killing people, the patient is not.”

Al-Maghrabi added: “The blood of recovered patients is being used abroad to find a treatment, while we, on the other hand, run from people who were patients and recovered from the disease. People today are in the middle of the event and are not acting logically. The repercussions must be significant after the pandemic ends.”



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