

Four years down, two to go: Lebanese president enters tough final stretch in office

Author:

Mon, 2020-11-02 21:07

BEIRUT: On Oct. 31 Lebanese President Michel Aoun completed four years in office with another two remaining before his term ends, amid the country's ever-plummeting fortunes. Aoun himself recently warned that Lebanon was going to hell if a new government could not be formed to resolve the nation's many woes.

The Lebanese pound has collapsed and living conditions have nosedived. The percentage of the population suffering from extreme poverty increased from 8 percent in 2019 to 23 percent in 2020. A devastating explosion in Beirut in August and the ongoing coronavirus health crisis has compounded the nation's problems.

The middle class is increasingly shrinking due to the loss of bank savings and the rising migration of young Lebanese and families, especially from the Christian community.

Weekly calls from the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai to preserve Lebanon's neutrality and the vision behind the country's establishment fall on deaf ears.

In Lebanon, the president's mandate is divided into three parts. The first part is usually known as the "golden period" for every leader. The second part is usually characterized by calm and a decline in production momentum.

The last two years turn into a difficult period due to the increase in political disputes and the competition of candidates to succeed.

However, despite the criticisms directed at Aoun's era, loyalists believe he has "made strength from weakness and restored prestige to the presidency."

They list his achievements as including the preparation of an annual budget after a 12-year hiatus, combating corruption by preparing various draft laws, Lebanon's accession to the UN Convention, approving the law on the right to access information, dealing with oil and gas exploration in regional waters, and tackling the issue of Syrian refugees.

The approval of a new electoral law based on proportional representation is hailed as another achievement which, according to these loyalists, led to the representation of political forces and parties according to their true size.

But MP Mohammed Al-Hajjar, from the Future bloc, said that Aoun's past four years had not lived up to expectations.

"The election law did not pass without it being approved by the Future Parliamentary Bloc because the bloc and the Future Movement are concerned with holding parliamentary elections," he told Arab News. "As for the talk about fighting corruption, it is just nonsense, because the reality shows horrific practices. Moreover, the obstacles that have been placed and are still facing the formation of governments and causing a vacuum were not in the interest of the administration."

He said the administration had not built strong external relations and that it was attempting to create new norms that were far from the constitution.

The secretary-general of the Progressive Socialist Party, Zafer Nasser, said that the first four years of Aoun's era were characterized by political instability and an economic and social collapse.

"The political process that the administration practiced and is now practicing appears as if it does not want to learn from the lessons of the past four years," he told Arab News. "Lebanon's foreign relations are severed with the Arabs and the West, and Aoun has been doing the opposite of what he promised. It seems that nothing is going to change in the next two years."

There had been full cooperation since the start of Aoun's era, he added, but "political maliciousness" had disrupted everything. "The administration doesn't have to raise buzzing slogans about fighting corruption and reform while it is practicing the opposite. The reality on the ground is a sign of failure, and the Lebanese in the next two years will live the path of Golgotha."

Naufal Daou, a member of the Lady of the Mountain opposition gathering, said it was "shameful" that Aoun's loyalists had spoken about the achievements made by his administration during the past four years.

"There is no stone, pound, human, hospital, group, company, and bank left in Lebanon," Daou told Arab News. "Administrations are usually evaluated according to their internal, economic and foreign policies. Foreign policy was a disaster, and domestic politics was full of conflicts. As for economic policy, it is a complete collapse."

He said that Aoun had come to power with near-unanimous backing but that this consensus and support, which was meant to be for the benefit of the whole country, had been handed over to Hezbollah.

He added that settlements and understandings had been interwoven with quotas over portfolios and positions, with no clear rules for domestic and foreign policy.

"Hezbollah told Aoun: 'You take the presidential seat and we run the country's foreign and defense policy.' Prime Minister (Saad) Hariri told him: 'You take the presidency and I take the premiership.' And the Lebanese Forces agreed with him on parity in the Christian seats in the government, parliament, and the public administration."

Daou said there was no need to anticipate what awaited the Lebanese in the

next two years. "Aoun, who has the data, told us that we are going to hell."



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Lebanon locks down 115 areas, imposes new curfew hours as coronavirus cases continue rise
Deal on horizon after Lebanon maritime border talks

[New law passed to dismiss extremists from state institutions in Egypt](#)

Mon, 2020-11-02 20:54

CAIRO: The Egyptian Parliament has approved, in principle, a draft law requiring the dismissal of employees of state agencies without taking disciplinary measures, in order to confront the spread of extremist ideologies.

Speaker Ali Abdel-Aal postponed taking a final decision on the bill, in order to present it to the State Council for review.

The new law aims to exclude employees and workers who are intellectually affiliated with terrorist organizations from working for state entities,

according to the explanatory notes for the new amendments to the law.

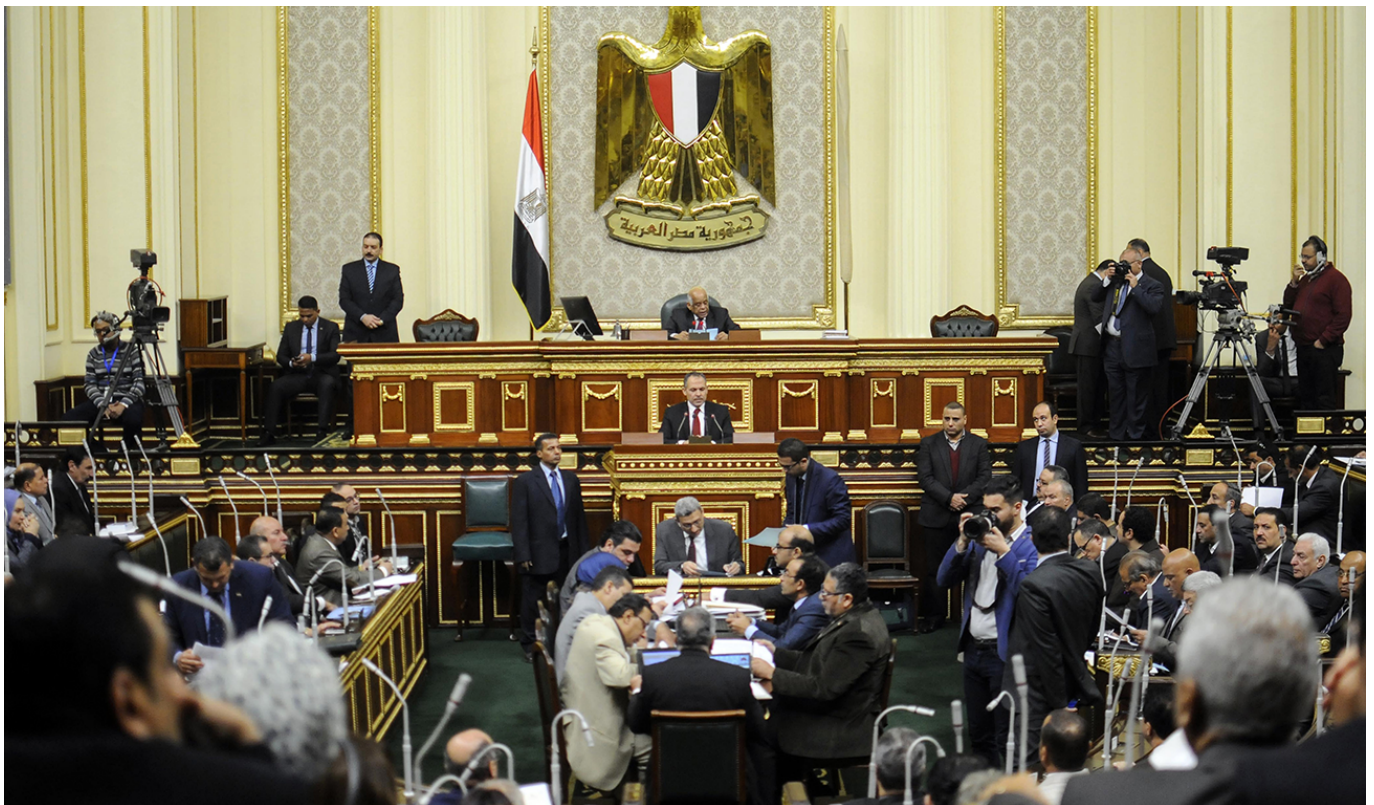
The first article of the draft stipulates that it will not be permissible to dismiss employees or workers, depending on the circumstances, in any of the state's administrative apparatus units, unless they violate the duties of the job in a way that would seriously harm production or the economic interests of the state or the bodies stipulated in the article, and if serious evidence had been established tying the employee to violating the security and safety of the state.

Ali Badr, who presented the bill, confirmed in press statements that the aim of it was to rid the state's administrative apparatus of terrorist elements in order to preserve the Egyptian state.

Badr stressed that the law was a continuation of a series of laws issued by Parliament to dry up sources of terrorism and deter anyone tempted to break the law.

Earlier this year, the Egyptian Minister of Education Tarek Shawki decided to dismiss 1,070 teachers because of affiliations with the Muslim Brotherhood group.

"It is a small percentage of 1.5 million teachers, to protect our children," Shawki said at the time.



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[Hezbollah, Gebran Bassil under fire over Lebanese government paralysis](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-11-02 02:27

BEIRUT: Frustration mounted in Lebanon on Sunday amid continuing paralysis in the formation of a new government, with fingers pointed at the Iran-backed Hezbollah group and Free Patriotic Movement leader Gebran Bassil as the source of the blockage.

Eleven days after former prime minister Saad Hariri was asked to resume office and assemble an administration of non-party technocrats, no date has even been set for a meeting with President Michel Aoun.

"We do not know if the obstructing parties actually want to form a government. It is about party quotas again, regarding the number of ministers and the rotation of portfolios," senior Hariri adviser Hussein Al-Wajh told Arab News.

Dr. Mustafa Alloush, a leading figure in Hariri's Future Movement, told Arab News: "The main obstacle to forming a government is Gebran Bassil, who has returned to his old demands."

Hariri resigned as prime minister in October 2019 amid a wave of public protests over financial corruption, government ineptitude and a collapsing economy. Neither of his successors, Hassan Diab and Mustapha Adib, was able to restore stability, and Lebanon has been without a government since September.

At the prompting of French President Emmanuel Macron, Hariri offered to lead a technocratic Cabinet in an initiative seen as opening the door to desperately needed international aid and a bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

Former minister Ahmed Fatfat told Arab News: "Hariri's project is a mini-government of specialists, which would not be against anyone or against the country, but Hezbollah stands behind the play of Gebran Bassil."

Health chiefs fear the government stalemate is compromising Lebanon's ability to combat the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected more than 80,000 people and killed 637. Caretaker Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmy on Sunday rejected a recommendation by the government's National Health Committee for a

national lockdown, and instead imposed restrictions in 115 towns.

The head of the Doctors Syndicate, Sharaf Abu Sharaf, called for a “complete shutdown similar to the one that took place at the beginning of the virus outbreak.”

He said: “The capacity of hospitals to absorb patients has reached its limit, and the health, recovery and financial situation is very poor. The medical and nursing sector is witnessing a large migration out of Lebanon, and there are no incentives to persuade them to stay.”



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[Crammed into camps, displaced Syrians fear spread of coronavirus](#)

Mon, 2020-11-02 00:41

QAH/SYRIA: Hassan Sweidat is terrified he will catch COVID-19 in the overcrowded displacement camp in northwest Syria he calls home, even more so as medical staff in the region have become sick.

Humanitarian workers fear any further rise in novel coronavirus cases would

be disastrous in northwest Syria, where almost 1.5 million people live in overcrowded camps or shelters, often with poor access to running water. In an informal settlement in Idlib, the country's last major rebel stronghold, Sweidat said he and other displaced Syrians did not stand much chance against the disease.

"We live in a camp all crammed in together. If someone talks to his family, all the neighbors can hear it," said Sweidat, who is in his forties and has an existing health condition.

If someone gets sick, "it's hardly the disease's fault," the father of six added.

In the encampment in Qah, a few makeshift solar panels shimmer on the canvas roofs of endless tiny breeze-block rooms where families have settled after being uprooted by war.

Resting after helping a friend build a small room to serve as a shop, Sweidat said he hopes he does not have to take anyone in his family to the local hospital.

"Hospitals are overcrowded. People have started to be scared of doctors and nurses, who they think might be infected, with all the sick people going to them."

Sweidat, who fled his home seven years ago, especially fears catching the Covid-19 disease as he suffers from a chronic liver condition.

"One of my relatives got it a while back, and I'm really scared because I have no immunity," he said. The Idlib bastion – now dominated by a group led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate – has been battered by years of war. Local and international humanitarian workers are working to contain the virus, but cases are still on the rise.

NUMBER

1.5m people live in overcrowded camps or shelters in northwest Syria, often with poor access to running water.

"In the northwest, confirmed cases have increased six-fold over the last month, with cases also rising in displacement camps and settlements," Mark Lowcock, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, told the UN Security Council on Tuesday. The health authorities in northwest Syria have officially announced 5,075 cases of Covid-19 so far, including 42 deaths. Of those, more than 860 cases have been recorded among health care staff and almost 330 people in the camps, figures showed on Wednesday.

Seated cross-legged on the floor, as she crushed small green olives one by one with a brick, 80-year-old Ghatwa Al-Mohammad said she and her family felt like sitting ducks.

"We're scared of the disease but we don't dare leave," she added. "We're so confused about what we should do. If only God would have us die and end our misery."

Of the 3 million people living in Idlib, around half live in makeshift homes and tents after escaping the fighting during Syria's nine-year civil war. The latest Russia-backed regime offensive on the region last winter killed around 500 civilians and forced nearly one million people to flee their towns

and villages.

Since a cease-fire brokered by Moscow and rebel-backer Ankara came into force in March, only around 200,000 people have returned home.

At the Idlib health directorate, doctor Yahya Naameh said they had asked residents to observe social distancing.

But he admitted that was “near impossible” in the hundreds of informal settlements dotting the region. Few in the camps wear masks.

Many cannot afford to buy face coverings, or to change them regularly, let alone disinfectant hand gels. For most, food, water, medicine and school supplies are far more important. “The regime and Russian forces are responsible for displacing these people and for the disastrous conditions in which they now live,” Naameh said.

Back in the camp, Mohammad Al-Omar, 40, agreed that asking people to self-isolate in a tent city was not realistic.

“They tell us, ‘Don’t go out. Don’t cause overcrowding’. But we live in tents barely half a meter (yard) apart,” said the father of four, who was displaced by the conflict eight years ago. “They give all of us who are older than five one mask as if that were enough. But it’s not.”

Omar, who works as the driver of a water truck, said he cannot stay inside the camp as he needs to earn money. “If I stay put in my tent, how will I live? How will I eat?”



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US accuses Syria of delaying constitution ahead of election

Coronavirus disrupts lives of Middle East's children with special needs

Sun, 2020-11-01 21:51

DUBAI: These days, social media is full of images and videos of children in various postures of remote learning, ranging from sleeping soundly on the study table to turning desks and chairs into makeshift swings.

After months of navigating the social complexities of the pandemic, even adults are feeling the mental strain of lockdowns and safety measures. As the “new normal” drags on, many complain that the supply of patience and energy is depleting.

For children with special needs, the effects are far more pronounced. “It has affected them psychologically because they’re not used to so many months of home confinement, sometimes without electricity or water,” Mohammed Dawoud told Arab News from Gaza, where he cares for his brothers Haytham and Hamza. Both have cerebral palsy.

Long weeks spent indoors have made his usually unflappable brothers much angrier, Dawoud said, adding: “I noticed it when talking to them and by seeing how they shout at each other.”

People with special needs are often deeply attached to consistent daily routines, which have been turned upside down by lockdown measures.



Children with special needs attend a class at a rehabilitation center in Iraq's northern city of Mosul on March 4, 2020. (AFP/Zaid Al-Obeidi)

"I think a lot of them thrive in environments that they're used to. They also have a certain schedule, a certain structure," said Alba Quadros, a special educational needs and teaching expert based in Dubai. "Because of the lockdown, this has completely crashed."

The closure of public spaces and schools, as well as limitations on social functions, to help curb the spread of coronavirus have also affected socializing with their peers.

"The challenge mainly was not being able to meet friends," Suneeta Ramakrishnan told Arab News from Dubai, describing the impact of the lockdown on her son Siddharth.

"He used to go to the nearby shops to buy basic groceries, and to his Special Needs Future Development Center independently, which got stopped."

Gina Rasmi, who lives in Egypt, said she has tried everything to help break the monotony of life under lockdown for her 14-year-old son Marc.

"It was very hard. Sitting at home made him angry, so I used to take him on car rides and drive around for an hour or two. At least he feels happy that he went out," Rasmi added.

Although many governments have adopted distance education to overcome gaps in the learning process, some special-needs children in Lebanon are missing out.

INNUMBERS

- 68.9% – Illiteracy rate among over-15 males with disabilities in Palestine's rural areas.
- 1.7 million – Persons with reported disabilities in Morocco in 2014.
- 677,492 Persons with reported disabilities in Iraq in 2013.
- 4x – Difference in proportion of persons without disabilities having attained some form of education and persons with disabilities in Oman.
- Source: WHO

"A lot of children didn't benefit from online learning due to parents' inability to help their children and the constant disruptions in electricity and the internet," said Kamal Nasr, administrator of the Robouana Social Charitable Association in Lebanon.

Some parents are not familiar with the technology or the special curriculum designed to help their children, while others simply cannot afford a home computer, Nasr added.

Moreover, not all special-needs people respond the same way to distance learning, with many preferring in-person sessions.

Through her initiative Determined and Dramatic, Quadros is working with special-needs children in Dubai to produce a virtual play about the effects of the pandemic on their daily lives.

"I have a couple of actors who respond much better to face-to-face instructions," she said. "I had to make sure they learned their lines, but how to deliver them is something I was only able to do once the lockdown was lifted."

On top of all this is the strain that COVID-19 has placed on the global economy, which has burdened households with additional financial worries.

Half a billion people are expected to be pushed into poverty by the pandemic's economic fallout.

An estimated 400 million jobs have already been lost, and the International Labour Organization estimates that more than 430 million small enterprises are at risk.

Across the Middle East, families are being pushed into poverty. "I had a mum who'd just recently lost her job. She comes from a middle-class family and yet she didn't have wi-fi at home, so it was very difficult to rehearse with her son online," Quadros said.



Children with special needs are participate in a 'Let's walk the Walk Together' race in Jeddah. They are among the estimated 450,000 people with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia. (Supplied)

Providing even the barest of essentials is becoming a struggle for many households. "Prices have doubled. I stopped buying vitamins and fresh fruits," said Dawoud.

"I try as much as possible to buy groceries, but public transport has stopped and the money isn't enough. There are eight months of rent which I haven't paid yet."

Hopes that some kind of assistance from the government or charities in Gaza would be forthcoming were quickly dashed. "No one has bothered," Dawoud said. Families in Lebanon face similar difficulties. "The (special-needs) associations used to cover part of the expenses," providing children in their care with snacks and three meals a day, Nasr said.

But government funding, which was barely enough to cover expenses, salaries and fuel for heaters before the crisis, has not been paid since 2019, he added.

Since Middle East governments began easing lockdown measures, populations have been forced to adapt to the new normal. Parents are now faced with the challenge of explaining safety measures to their children.

At the Hope Academy in Egypt, where Rasmi's son Marc is a pupil, teachers and parents are doing their best to educate the children without scaring them. "We shouldn't scare them and make them feel like life has now become bad. We should just tell them, 'It's a phase and it'll pass, but during that time we have to protect ourselves so we don't get sick'," Rasmi said.



Hamza Dawoud, right, and his brother Haytham, who both have cerebral palsy, have found it hard to cope with being confined to home. (Supplied)

Parents and staff have taught their children to wash their hands regularly, to wear a face mask and to follow social distancing rules.

"A lot of the children can follow (the safety measures), and those who can't we make sure we wash their hands and take care of the other instructions," Rasmi said.

Other schools have started house visits to check on the students and their families, said Nasr of the Robouana Social Charitable Association.

"We also organized a one-day event to teach them about coronavirus, its symptoms and precaution methods through a small performance and some games," he added.

Some parents, such as Siddharth's mum Ramakrishnan, have used this period of isolation to teach their children how to use voice-messaging and online shopping apps.

"He has made a time schedule to get in touch with his friends, grandparents and other family members by learning how to use these apps. This has helped him learn about 'turn taking' while talking," Ramakrishnan said.

Although the pandemic has placed immense strains on households, Quadros sees a silver lining for children with special needs: More time with mum and dad.

“They were able to have their parents around and to have them fully,” she said. “I feel like they were able to cope because there was a lot of family time.”





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Keeping special needs children involved during lockdown
Integrating special needs students in Saudi public schools key to their development