



**COVID-19 pandemic:**  
**Does the mainstream public policies system achieve  
protection for all?**  
**A comparative study Egypt- Lebanon- Tunisia**  
**(English Synopsis)**



**Arab Forum for Alternatives**

**Mohamed El Agati- Shima El Sharkawy**

**Nissaf Brahim- Zainab Srourr**

## **Executive summary:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the world in front of many challenges regarding public policies and state responses to the spread of the pandemic. This as well has led to raising multiple concerns concerning fair and equitable public service provision and the process of doing that with accordance to social justice values. This paper examines the three cases of Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon, in public policies and state responses in facing the pandemic. It attempts to test the ability of countries in the region to provide services at times of crises. This is done through analyzing public policymaking methods in light of the current crisis and trying to reveal the gaps that need to be dealt with in order to develop the capabilities of the state and ensure justice at times of crises, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

## **Introduction:**

According to official statistics, the COVID-19 pandemic has infected more than six million people worldwide as of the end of May 2020, more than 300,000 people died, and the virus has been detected in almost every country in the world.

The global pandemic and various responses to its spread around the world have raised multiple questions and concerns about the current economic system and crisis management, both on the national and the international levels. The pandemic has also raised important questions about equitable and fair provision of public services to all citizens without any discrimination as well as questions about the important role of governments and municipalities in providing public services during times of crisis.

This paper's main research question is as follows: Is the process of making public policies in the Arab region, together with the existing economic pattern and its systems, capable of dealing with emergency and acute crises effectively and efficiently while taking into account the rules of justice?

The paper focuses on three countries in the Arab region—Tunisia, Lebanon, and Egypt—and attempts to test the ability of countries in the region to provide services at times of crises. This is done through analyzing public policymaking methods in light of the current crisis and trying to reveal the gaps that need to be dealt with in order to develop the capabilities of the state and ensure justice at times of crises, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

## **First: The Confrontation: an overview of the responses to the pandemic:**

With the global emergence of COVID-19, Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon started taking precautionary measures and implementing a number of strategies to face the pandemic. The most important strategies adopted in the three countries did not differ from what was recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and followed by most countries in the world, with the exception of the few countries that announced the adoption of the "herd immunity" strategy.

Despite the differences in each case, there are several common traits. For instance, in order to implement those measures, each country formed a crisis management committee. The prime ministers of Tunisia and Egypt headed the committee while in Lebanon it was headed by the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Defence. Members of the three committees included ministers of defence, interior, justice, health, finance, trade, education, higher education, media, and social affairs.

It is worth noting that in Lebanon and Tunisia, strategies used to control the spread of the virus were adapted to developments of the crisis while in the Egyptian case, there was a shift from the strategy of partial lockdown to that of herd immunity. This underlines the pressure the government was exposed to by economic interest groups, who proved throughout the crisis to be an essential part of the power structure in Egypt that is able to influence, and even change, state policies so that their interests are not affected. Regarding communication on the international level, the Egyptian government was more efficient, as it used the method of mutual support and took the initiative to provide assistance to countries in which the pandemic spread before Egypt instead of only offering moral support or seeking benefits such as aid.



### **Second: The status of public services and the pandemic:**

The three countries have taken serious efforts to face the pandemic and to support the provision of essential services like food supply, electricity, and public services such as health, education, and social security. The efforts varied from provision of some goods at lower prices to temporary cost-exemption in some other cases. However, some vulnerable groups remained excluded from protection networks formed during the crisis. In the procedures for providing financial assistance to vulnerable groups, the government did not provide any solutions for workers and technicians in the private sector, many of whom are still forced to work under these conditions. It did not provide any precise measures in favour of small and medium farmers, nor did it provide anything for workers in the informal sector and hundreds of thousands of poor people not registered in the lists of the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, governments tried to deal with the latter through approving new procedures for registering unregistered workers in each country differently. Egypt made extensive use of technological applications while Tunisia devised ways to communicate with local authorities and placed an order for financial assistance of about USD 80.

These measures reveal that the goal of governments in the first place was to deal with the crisis rather than support affected groups. Tunisia did allocate support to affected groups, but that was not the basis of its approach to dealing with the crisis, which appears in the rest of the procedures. The sectors that benefited most from these procedures were businessmen and owners of companies and factories, which was mainly demonstrated in Egypt.

It is important to note that the nature of the political system in terms of its degree of openness is sometimes of a great influence. Even though the decision-making process in Egypt is more centralized than in Tunisia, the influence of economic powers on decisions was greater in Tunisia. The crisis also highlighted that various countries in the Arab region possess resources that can be mobilized and used, yet the question is for whose benefit. In Lebanon, for example, resources were used politically in the pandemic, which political actors tried to benefit from the

situation to achieve certain political goals. On the other hand, resources that should have been used in one way or another were overlooked to preserve the interests of limited groups. These include the resources of the private sector, especially the healthcare sector. The use of these resources has been left subject to the will of their owners. Although this could be acceptable under normal circumstances, a crisis such as the pandemic requires comprehensive planning, which means that the state should integrate these resources into its plan, even if this happens after coordination with these groups.

### **Third: Where does the money come from? / Allocation of resources and the pandemic**

Each of the three countries announced that it will not require any changes to its current public budget and allocations will be made from within the budget. The three countries also resorted to depending on loans and aid from international actors such as the World Bank in the case of Lebanon and Egypt, the International Monetary Fund in the case of Egypt, and aid from other countries in the case of Tunisia that received aid from the Italian government.

Evidence in each country showed the absence of any attempts to involve the private sector and depended on it in the health sector's contributions, even though it has not benefited from it despite its expansion and brutality in recent years.

Despite measures that attempted to let the most capable groups bear most of the burden resulting from the repercussions of this crisis, the policies adopted to support various sectors and groups are still governed by the "spill over" mentality as the support methodology is directed towards the owners of businesses and companies. Developments proved difficulties to achieve this in light of this crisis, as many institutions either reduced wages or laid off workers.



Some companies even headed for temporary or total closure. In Lebanon, for example, many companies decided to reduce or suspend salaries until conditions improve. Also in Egypt, different companies reduced salaries in light of the spread of the virus.

### **Fourth: Confronting the pandemic and vulnerable groups:**

Each country of the three announced exceptional procedures in order to deal with the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable groups such as women, informal labor, refugees, detainees and convicts, people with disabilities, the elderly, children, and people with chronic diseases.

Regarding support for vulnerable groups, it appears that Egypt was distinguished in setting a system that merges technological tools and traditional mechanisms for those unable to deal with modern ones, which is also evident in the decisions regarding women in Egypt. However, Tunisia did not need this because of the difference in the size of the population, while Lebanon

was less in need due to the territorial division in it, meaning that each country was able to put in place a system of support mechanisms that was appropriate to its nature and status. Certainly, obstacles in implementation and setbacks in performance faced the system that was developed and implemented rapidly in light of an unprecedented and escalating crisis. This could have been avoided through more involvement of municipalities, civil society, and citizens in this process.

On the human rights level, Lebanon and Tunisia paid attention to indirect dimensions of the crisis, such as the increase in domestic violence, and was quick to provide support and protection for victims, even though the three countries did not give adequate care in this area to people with special needs and the elderly. Politically, Tunisia made immediate decisions regarding prisoners, compared to procrastination in Lebanon and complete intransigence in Egypt. However, Egypt dealt better with the refugee issues and so did Tunisia, unlike Lebanon, whose handling of this issue was rather disappointing.

#### **Fifth: Transparency and media discourse: is there any development?**

There was some development in media discourse in the three countries. For example, in Egypt, the level of government discourse evolved as more press conferences are held and more attention is given to daily follow-ups and updates on the spread and control of the pandemic. This was also done through the Facebook pages of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Health and Population as well as through various TV channels and radio stations in addition to extensive advertisements that gave tips on ways to confront the virus and called upon citizens to stay at home.

In Lebanon, the government and relevant authorities interacted well on the level of communication with the media and citizens through providing them with all required information. The Lebanese Ministry of Information launched on its website a special page to act as the official source of all information about the virus and procedures as part of its plan to facilitate access to information for media outlets.

In Tunisia, Public media channels devoted most of their awareness programs to the pandemic and to doctors, scientists, and specialists to talk about the disease in addition to a daily press conference at eleven in the morning to announce the latest updates.

The difference in the way the media dealt with the crisis in the three cases confirms that governments in the three countries are, in fact, capable of using the media efficiently and supporting knowledge and transparency. This means that the fact that this does not happen in normal circumstances attributed to lack of will, not ability. Moreover, moments of openness and the use of media outlets to publish documented information were the ones that witnessed a higher response from citizens. This confirms that transparency is not a luxury and is not an obstacle to development and the implementation of the decisions related to it, but rather an important and essential mechanism in supporting the implementation of decisions that reflect needs and priorities.



### **Sixth: Civil society and municipalities in the face of the pandemic:**

The pandemic showed that relief and charitable initiatives were the most responsive in the three countries. Although there were attempts of political investment, which was demonstrated in the Lebanese case, such initiatives were commendable and essential under the circumstances. Through social media, civil society played a major role in disseminating knowledge about developments on the spread of the virus, preventive measures, and tips on how to act in case of displaying symptoms. As the number of cases increased, the supportive role of civil society was remarkably highlighted, especially in providing health support, securing the basic needs of incapable groups, and offering services for simple cases over the phone or through specific hospitals. This role was particularly prominent in the Egyptian case.

Bureaucracy has essentially hindered all these efforts. Despite the willingness of many associations to work and volunteer to support the state's efforts to deal with the pandemic, several obstacles hinder its work. This was the case in Tunisia, for example, especially in obtaining security licenses for transportation.

As for municipalities, their role in the crisis reflected the extent of centralization and openness of the political system in each of the three countries. In Tunisia, whose system is characterized by a high degree of democracy, the role of municipalities was clear, particularly on the legislative level as they made decisions specific to their regions to activate a plan to face the crisis.



In the Lebanese system, which relies highly on decentralization, the municipalities have played a major role in facing the COVID-19 crisis. On one hand, they are in direct contact with citizens, particularly in villages and towns, and on the other hand, they are linked to the work of the Ministry of Interior, which is entrusted with many tasks pertaining to handling the COVID-19 crisis.

As for Egypt, which witnessed a democratic decline, municipalities have been absent since 2011. In addition to a long history of centralization that has always marginalized municipalities, they have hardly had a clear role in the crisis except at the level of following up on national decisions.

### **Seventh: Democracy and governance in light of the pandemic:**

To encapsulate, few difference can be detected in the three countries' response to the crisis, which is illustrated in the phases each country went through and the strategies and mechanisms identified for dealing with the pandemic. Community participation during the first phase remained limited in the three cases, which continued in the preliminary steps. The three cases witnessed the absence of the parliament and the dominance of the executive authority in dealing with the crisis, even if some formality procedures were taken in this regard.

Actual participation began in the implementation phase, which was a promising start in the three cases. An active role for the municipalities appeared in the Tunisian case. In addition, entities formed to monitor and follow-up in the three countries began to follow the plan, and a serious trend appeared in the use of the media by governments to communicate with society. As time passed, a clear decline began to appear in some indicators, but the results and developments in the Lebanese and Tunisian cases were largely positive, and dealing with changes according to developments, such as re-closure in Lebanon after a number of infected cases re-appeared at the end of May. Egypt, on the other hand, headed towards amending the strategy, as the study showed, as questions were raised about the viability of the closure or partial lockdown strategy due to its impact on the economy and with increasing support for the argument that calls for coexistence with virus as opposed to those that promote closure.



### **Conclusion:**

In light of the suffocating economic crisis many countries have been going through in recent years, the pandemic has come to expose the defects of many state institutions in the world. This is particularly applied to basic public services such as healthcare and the hospital sector. Despite the great effort made by the ministries of health in the three countries during this period, structural defects still have a powerful impact on the outcome of such efforts.

This pandemic has also put security solutions to the test once more. Compelling citizens to abide by quarantine instructions and adopting a security approach without providing them with their basic needs such as food, medicine and clothing, proved a failure. Groups that are most

affected by quarantine began to either violate instructions, which is the case in Egypt, or resort protests, as in the Lebanese case.

Attempts to deal with the crisis in the three countries resulted from a high sense of responsibility, but there was a clear need for more efficient management of resources, which requires a different approach in public policymaking at the procedural and technical levels. The minor role of parliaments in the crisis as well as elected municipalities at the level of monitoring and evaluation shows a clear procedural flaw in policymaking.

Furthermore, not making use of the resources of the private sector and other sectors in the country to deal with the crisis indicates the necessity of reviewing planning methodologies to mobilize resources at the time of crises.

It must be emphasized that the policymaking process must take place in a participatory and democratic framework that guarantees citizen participation, starting from defining societal problems, through monitoring, oversight and feedback, to planning and implementation. This, unquestionably, guarantees the transparency of the process and the accountability of political officials, so that the largest portion of citizens do not always remain under the control of a handful of people who control economic resources.

A full partnership with civil society and its organizations is essential not only to promote community participation and enhance the role of such an integral part of any society, but also to act as an instrument of pressure that can impact policies for the aim of achieving the common good. Civil society should be involved in the first stages of the making of public policies through making recommendations and providing analysis as well as submitting proposals and monitoring implementation.

Moreover, public policymaking should not lose sight of other dimensions related to social justice, such as the gender dimension, especially with regard to the equitable distribution of resources, as well as environmental dimensions and long-term policy implications and dealing with these issues seriously. The importance of decentralization in the Arab region cannot be overlooked and expanding its scope and activating its role have become an essential need. Moreover, decentralization can contribute to broader participation in decision-making at the local level.

The development of a social protection system essentially requires central financing, and it can be achieved through a fairer tax system. Developing this protectionist system to include all citizens will benefit all segments and classes through serious progressive taxes, capital gains taxes, and periodic taxes on wealth, to be devoted to financing the inclusiveness and fairness of social security and protection networks.

**Full Research Paper is available in Arabic: <http://afalebanon.org/?p=8414>**