Covid-19 repercussions on civic space: an exploratory study on the situation in Lebanon and Tunisia

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August 2022

Executive summary

This report presents the main findings of a research project exploring the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic on civil society space in Tunisia and Lebanon. The investigation comprised desk research, an online survey directed at civil society representatives, bilateral interviews with key informants and a focus group.

The research team has come to the conclusion that overall, the pandemic has had a limited direct effect on civil society space in the countries under investigation. The freedom of association and the freedom of expression did not suffer in any significant way due to measures taken by governments to prevent the spread of the coronavirus or address its repercussions in the health sector or other sectors affected by the pandemic. However, governments in both countries continued to persecute critical CSOs, bloggers and activists throughout the period under investigation (early 2020 - late 2021).

The main repercussions of the pandemic that could be identified through the research relate to the freedom of peaceful assembly. On the one hand, there was no clear strategy by state authorities in either country to target civil society actors, at least not during the early phase of the pandemic. On the other hand, the authorities in Tunisia and Lebanon did make active use of legislation and regulations adopted during the initial Covid-19 wave (first quarter of 2020) to repress protests, not only in the Spring of 2020, but also later that year and in 2021. This has resulted in a degradation of the freedom of peaceful assembly in Tunisia and Lebanon.

The pandemic's repercussions for civil society organisations (CSOs) and unregistered civil society groups and initiatives with regard to freedom of movement vary depending on many factors, including target groups, regional focus, working methods, but also personal connections to decision makers (especially in Lebanon). For instance, CSOs implementing their activities in locations in remote areas generally found it more difficult to reach their target audiences than CSOs whose staff are based near their beneficiaries, as mobility was often restricted between regions, but less so within certain regions or areas. Likewise, some CSOs were used to working online before the pandemic and therefore felt its impact on their day-to-day activities less strongly than CSOs whose activities, by their very nature, rely heavily on real-life interactions on the ground (including in the healthcare and psychosocial support sectors). As of June 2022, most of the mobility restrictions adopted during the early phase of the pandemic were, however, not in force any longer.

Regarding the impact of the pandemic on the relationship between civil society actors and state entities, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, there are positive examples of increased cooperation, which must, however, be assessed with regard to the inability of the governments in both countries to address the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic effectively on their own. On the other hand, political leaders in both countries instrumentalised the emergency powers that they obtained due to the pandemic to crack down on dissenting voices from within civil society and political opposition groups.

On the positive side, the research has shown that civil society played a major role in addressing the pandemic and that the need for an efficient and effective emergency response has resulted in increased civic activism and improved coordination and cooperation among CSOs and other types of civil society actors. Civil society actors have demonstrated that they can be flexible and adapt to immediate challenges by refocusing their activities in line with the most urgent needs of the population.

Based on these findings, the authors have identified windows of opportunity for supporting civil society actors in defending or promoting civic space. They recommend that international donors such as the EU:

♣ Conduct or commission further research to better understand the role played by 'non-traditional' civil society actors during the pandemic and provide targeted support to selected initiatives;

♣ Encourage local civil society actors to explore new income generating activities and engage governments in dialogue about creating an enabling legal and regulatory framework in this regard;

♣ Facilitate cooperation between CSOs and other types of civic actors working on the same themes as well as between civil society actors and decision makers in the state structures that are open to engaging civil society representatives in political decision making processes;

♣ Together with governments and CSOs, identify positive examples of cooperation during the pandemic, assess the results and reflect on how such cooperation could be upscaled and continued;

♣ Identify local cooperation mechanisms involving local authorities and CSOs that have been created during the pandemic and assess how they could be continued and/or upscaled;

♣ Facilitate sharing of lessons learned between civil society actors from different countries of the wider region. Identify successful strategies for rolling back restrictive legislation adopted to fight the pandemic, building coalitions and capitalising on the civil society networks that have been created to respond to the pandemic;

♣ Monitor closely if and how the political leadership in EU partner countries makes use of laws, regulations and other policy instruments adopted during the early phases of the pandemic to repress dissent;

♣ Continue to support CSOs engaged in advocacy and watchdog activities and allow CSO beneficiaries to refocus their activities – from Covid-related emergency response actions towards issues that are crucial for protecting civic space and democracy;

♣ Encourage coalition building among pro-democratic forces in civil society and provide flexible support for multi-stakeholder initiatives, ideally in partnership with democracy support organisations.