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THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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Valeria Betancourt

Editor

Alan Finlay

Assistant editor

Lori Nordstrom

Publication production

Mallory Knodel

Proofreading

Valerie Dee
Lori Nordstrom

Graphic design

Monocromo
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 2 400 1685

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo

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LEBANON

NAMING AND SHAMING: ENCOURAGING ACCOUNTABILITY IN BUSINESS



Mireille Raad

Introduction

For the third time since 2009, Lebanon received a score of 2.5 out of 10 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2011.¹ This index, produced by Transparency International and covering 183 countries, is measured on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (very clean).

The score places Lebanon in the 134th position out of 183 worldwide and 15th out of 18 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It is also notable that the best score ever achieved by Lebanon is 3.2 – the worst being 2.0.²

Other indicators like the Open Budget Index place the country among the least transparent when it comes to the national budget (OBI=32%).³

World Bank governance indicators suggest very high levels of corruption and bad governance (see Figure 1). Out of 212 countries reviewed, Lebanon ranked:⁴

- Government effectiveness indicator: 146th
- Political stability indicator: 202nd
- Voice and accountability indicator: 108th
- Corruption control indicator: 167th.

Policy and political background

Ironically, despite the above indicators, reform and the fight against corruption have always been at the core of the political agendas of all the Lebanese political parties, and a main theme for political bickering.⁵ In theory, most of the policy framework needed to fight corruption appears to exist; for example, the Lebanese Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform was created in 1994 in order to provide solutions for a deficient post-civil war public administration.⁶

On 22 April 2009, Lebanon ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC),⁷ yet many of the mechanisms required to ensure compliance with the convention are either dysfunctional or missing, including an absence of:

- Access to information legislation
- A whistleblowers' protection law
- A national anti-corruption agency
- An ombudsman⁸
- A national strategic, long-term anti-corruption plan.

Naturally, given the severity of corruption in Lebanon and its drastic effect on society, many NGOs and independent activists are going to great efforts to fight it – including LTA (the Lebanese chapter of Transparency International) and Nahwa el Mouwatinya via their Lebanese Parliamentary Monitor.⁹

Spinneys, spin and labour wage rights denied

On 19 January 2012, following an agreement reached between the economic committees and the General Workers' Union, the Lebanese cabinet approved raising Lebanon's minimum wage from LBP 500,000 to LBP 675,000 (from USD 333 to USD 450).¹⁰ A general wage increase was also approved based on salary ranges.

The decision came after the State Shura Council rejected the cabinet's wage increase decision proposed by Minister of Labour Charbel Nahas.

The agreement was reached following a strong debate that lasted several months and ended with the resignation of the minister of labour, who argued that all of his colleagues in government were preventing any effective improvement in workers' rights.¹¹

Yet despite the official upgrade in salaries, Spinneys, a well-known and premier supermarket retailer in Lebanon with branches across the Middle East, and a major employer, breached both international labour rights and Lebanese labour laws by refusing to implement the wage increase, threatening employees and dismissing those who lobbied and objected to its refusal.

1 cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results

2 files.transparency.org/content/download/313/1264/file/CPI2011_DataPackage.zip

3 internationalbudget.org/what-we-do/open-budget-survey

4 info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/pdf/country.asp

5 www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Nov-15/154093-mikati-promises-to-fight-corruption-in-administration.ashx#axzz23Au9q0sY

6 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office_of_the_Minister_of_State_for_Administrative_Reform_\(Lebanon\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office_of_the_Minister_of_State_for_Administrative_Reform_(Lebanon))

7 www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CAC/signatories.html

8 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ombudsman

9 lpmonitor.org

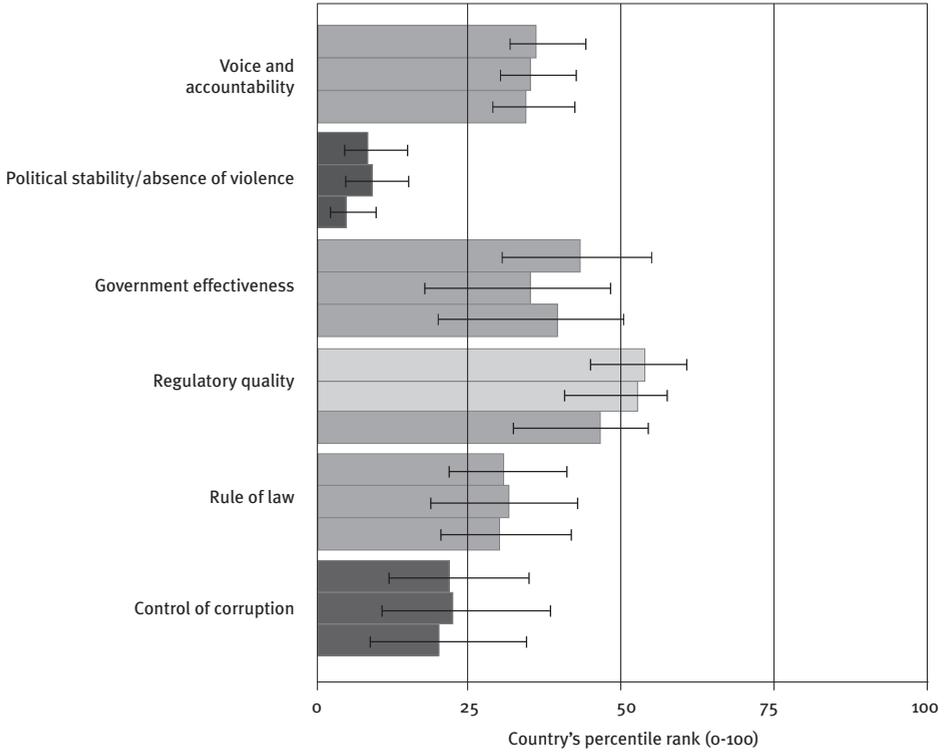
10 www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=354211

11 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charbel_Nahas

FIGURE 1

World Bank Governance Indicators

Comparison between 2010, 2009, 2008 (top-bottom order)



Source: info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc_chart.asp

The Lebanese government took no action to enforce its own decision and no penalties against Spinneys were levied. The topic also received little attention from most of the media, especially in media outlets where Spinneys spent a lot of advertising money.

Following the above events, many Lebanese bloggers and activists decided to shed light on the unfairness and corruption which affected a large number of workers (about 1,500) who had no support from their own government and no option but to do their best to keep their jobs.

Bloggers and activists targeted Spinneys' approximately 21,000 fans on Facebook using an ironic online campaign that showcased the real discounts the company is offering – in other words, workers' rights and wages.

Spinneys own advertisements were mocked and a call for a boycott was issued.¹² Many workers also



used social media to share their personal stories about their working conditions.

The campaign got the full attention of Spinneys CEO Michael Wright who in turn used social media and Facebook to uncover the identities of different

12 www.facebook.com/groups/331955206888302



activists and their work locations. Soon enough, Spinneys' powerful business connections were put to use and some activists received formal warnings from their employers on the pretext of "breaking company rules and blogging/Facebooking during work hours" or breaking their work contracts by "harming company interests".

Under the risk of losing their jobs, some bloggers were forced to remove blog posts and content from Facebook and agreed to stop their involvement in the social media campaign targeting Spinneys.

BLOG, LEBANON, SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

****Title removed****

by Abir on Jul 17, 2012

the content on my PERSONAL blog was removed, due to extensive pressure from several sides, you know we have bills to pay (most of you know the story and I thank you for the support).

If you need any info about the "matter" you can check Al-Akhbar newspaper.

More details to be shared if the circumstances allow it.

A counter social media campaign was launched by Spinneys to explain to the public the decision behind refusing the wage increase: Many people reported being contacted by Spinneys' CEO after doing simple things such as pressing "like" on a comment criticising Spinneys.¹³



Racha El Halabi

Just received this message so thought of sharing it with you :

Dear Ms. Halabi

I have noticed that you have "liked" on a comment on Facebook against Spinneys, no doubt due to a belief that we are abusing the rights of our employees based on the comments made.

However I consider that we have been badly miss-represented in this matter by Al-Akhbar and more recently by the Ex-Minister, for political reasons and without any reference to us on what has actually happened.

I thought it would be useful for me to explain our position to you and to leave it to you to decide if we have been unfair in what we have been trying to do.

In an interview with the *Daily Star*, Wright said the retailer would continue to expand in Lebanon despite "tough economic times that saw sales growth flattening for the first time last quarter, after four years of impressive double-digit growth."

He added, "In addition to regional troubles and local instability, ill-fated economic decisions, including a wage increase approved by the government last January, are behind Lebanon's economic slump."

The same article reports that "[b]etween 2006 and 2011, Spinneys experienced very high growth at above 20 percent annually in sales volumes" and "Wright dismissed accusations that the company has been infringing on labour rights [and that this is] politically motivated. He said the accusations are only rallying a handful of workers."¹⁴

A lot of buzz was generated due to the opposing social media campaigns by both sides and the subject gained considerable media attention on many TV stations and in newspapers – for example, in its Media Round-up, the Lebanese Transparency Association shared this case with its readers as yet another example of a corruption scandal to plague the government.¹⁵

Not everyone was behind the campaign, however. On the Lebanese blogosphere, Rami Fayoumi blogging on plus961.com shared his scepticism about the boycott campaign, stating that Spinneys is not the only company disrespecting the new wage increase.¹⁶ Similarly, Mustapha Hamoui blogging on beirutspring.com stated: "An online campaign is trying to shame a giant Lebanese retailer into paying more for its employees. This is a bad idea." Both plus961.com and BeirutSpring.com rank among the most influential independent bloggers in Lebanon.

¹³ www.facebook.com/groups/331955206888302/permalink/333635833386906

¹⁴ www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2012/Aug-03/183221-spinneys-eyes-expansion-amid-tough-times.ashx#axzz23GrPhyZA

¹⁵ www.transparency-lebanon.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=85&Itemid=180&lang=en

¹⁶ www.plus961.com/2012/07/boycott-spinneys

At the moment of writing this report, this case is far from being resolved: currently the workers in Spinneys have a newly formed union and the debate continues online and offline.¹⁷

Conclusion

This story clearly shows that ICTs can be used to uncover corruption and fight it by different means, including public shaming and calls for a boycott.

Yet those same tools can be used to justify corrupt behaviour using well-crafted social media strategies and messages, and can be used to monitor activists and bloggers, uncovering their identities and then using different means to silence or pressurise them.

Dialogue can easily be sparked using social media, and facts about corruption and the people behind it can become well known in a short period of time. The main challenge remains in translating this knowledge and “online buzz” into real action. Mobilising to fight corruption means leveraging the potential of the “disorganised” online space and the strength of the effects of things like crowd-sourcing in a way that favours the work of activists.

Anonymity remains yet another issue to think about. While it offers good protection for activists against corrupt and powerful people and entities, it makes it harder to build an audience, trust and engagement (without at least subtly revealing identity). The difficulty is not in the technical requirements of being anonymous online, but rather in the tricky planning required to run a campaign effectively led by “no one”.

Fighting corruption works best on a case-specific basis – not just by addressing and discussing corruption as a general theme. Targeting a corrupt individual or company using a specially crafted campaign is effective due to the high level of pressure it generates and (hopefully) the high cost of loss of business and reputation.

Action steps

This story suggests different advocacy steps that are essential for the ICT activist:

- Fighting corruption should be addressed on a case-by-case basis and not only as an issue of general principles and ethics.
- Unlike other activist issues such as advocating for rights generally, an effective and targeted campaign against corruption will put you in a confrontation with “criminals”. Having a good strategic and even legal background on crime and criminals and a bulletproof game plan in this regard is a must.
- Data is created once and shared many times. This simple truth can be used to hide the identity of campaign organisers and make it impossible to find or hold responsible anyone running an anonymous account.
- Due to the increasing “social” properties of the internet, it is becoming a huge, free-to-access and easy-to-operate data mine about you, your work, career, family, friends and geolocations. This is why keeping track of your digital footprint is an increasingly important task as an anti-corruption ICT activist. ■

¹⁷ beirutspring.com/blog/2012/07/11/burning-spinneys-at-the-stake