

Dire transparency ranking blamed on graft

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BEIRUT: Political corruption and conflicts of interest at the highest level of government are to blame for Lebanon maintaining one of the worst transparency rankings in the world, according to a closely watched annual report published Tuesday. Lebanon ranked 138th out of 180 countries, maintaining for the sixth year in a row a score of 28 out of 100 on Transparency International's global ranking.

Lebanon did place better than last year, when it ranked 143rd out of 180, but "this change does not show any improvement in Lebanon, rather it is because of a regression in other countries in the world," according to Mosbah Majzoub of the Lebanese Transparency Association, Transparency International's local partner that announced the results of the report.

"It's good news we didn't rank lower. The bad news is we wanted to see an improvement," Caretaker Minister of State for Combating Corruption Nicolas Tueni told The Daily Star.

He added: "I apologize if I am not on the level that people had hoped for, but I worked from my conscience and with what I had available to me. If we prevented things from getting worse, that's good."

Tueni acknowledged that the political class had no interest in fighting corruption, because they were responsible for it.

Asked if he should have resigned in protest of the lack of progress, he responded, "It's better to stay and do work."

Lebanon's sectarian system is synonymous with "political corruption because the politicians use this sectarianism for their personal interests," Majzoub told The Daily Star.

He also noted that Transparency International had serious reservations on some aspects of the May parliamentary elections - the first to be held in nine years - particularly regarding large expenditures of money that were unaccounted for.

"The laws organizing the funding of political parties and parliamentary candidates are one of the main issues in transparency and accountability," he said.

Confidence in the state decreased further with the ensuing monthslong government formation deadlock and ongoing delays to announce the results of appeals against the elections submitted by over a dozen candidates, Majzoub said.

Lebanon's corruption problems are indicative of a broader crisis: In a cross-analysis of its survey with global democracy data, Transparency International said there was a link between corruption and the health of a democracy.

Full democracies scored an average of 75 on the corruption index, flawed democracies averaged 49 and autocratic regimes averaged 30, the organization said.

The ratings reflect the "deterioration of rule of law and democratic institutions, as well as a rapidly shrinking space for civil society and independent media."

Two-thirds of countries ranked lower than 50 out of 100.

Denmark maintained its first-place ranking, with a score of 88 over 100, followed by New Zealand and Finland at 87 and 85, respectively.

The global average was 43, and for Arab countries it was 34.

The United Arab Emirates ranked best in the region with a score of 70, while Somalia came in last in the region and worldwide with a score of just 10 out of 100.

Lebanon came in 13th out of the 22 countries in the region, behind Djibouti and ahead of Mauritania.

Majzoub noted that Parliament's ratification of two anti-corruption laws in 2018 - namely the whistleblower protection law and a law on transparency in oil and gas contracts - were positive developments.

But he cautioned that another anti-corruption law, the 2017 Access to Information Law, "has remained unimplemented by most administrations and institutions."

A national strategy on combating corruption awaits Cabinet's endorsement whenever a government is formed, while a raft of laws - including one to rein in illicitly acquired wealth, another to strengthen oversight bodies and legislation establishing a national commission to combat corruption - await ratification by lawmakers.

"Talk of combating corruption reached its peak in the speeches of ministers and MPs last year," Majzoub noted, "while Lebanese citizens still suffer from serious challenges regarding their social and economic rights." - With agencies