How Vagueness of Information Became a Tool for Controlling Public Spaces in Lebanon

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Influential politicians and businessmen have long tried, and often succeeded, in controlling public spaces in Lebanon, both along the coast and in the hinterland. The Lebanese people are, for the most part, notoriously deprived of access to all kinds of public spaces. There is practically no free access to the sea along the length of the coast, and very few public gardens in the cities, the capital included. With time, what would be considered as scandalous in other countries has become normal practice in Lebanon. For example, the proliferation of private resorts on the public coastal domain does not concern or stir the masses. Only a handful of activists have managed, over the years, to raise questions about this matter. In this activists often have to face an invisible but pernicious enemy: rumours aimed at deflecting people’s attention from their right to access public spaces. Lack of communication on the part of the authorities, secrets surrounding controversial projects, insufficient information, clashes between civil activists and authorities, are all factors that have frequently led to the spreading of rumours. Often these rumours have affected campaigning for the right to access public spaces, and, sometimes, the projects themselves.

The scandals related to public spaces are many and varied. One of the latest scandals concerns the coast of Dalieh, well known to Ras Beirut residents, which was recently claimed as private property by companies owned by the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri’s heirs. They apparently planned to build a big resort on this little beach overlooking the Pigeon Rocks (Raoucheh). In other places, the problem has been the result of the authorities’ mismanagement of highly controversial cases such as those of the Jesuit Garden’s planned parking (which was to be built under the public garden, causing its temporary destruction before its final reconstruction); the Beirut pine forest (Horsh Beirut), still closed to the public many years after its renovation; or the planned commencement of a fifty year-old road project, the Fouad Bustros highway through the Hikmeh quarter in Achrafieh, to the dismay of many of this neighbourhood’s residents. These issues are often referred to by activists and officials whenever they are asked about their experiences in dealing with rumours.

How do rumours affect campaigning to access public space?

The undefined nature of rumours often makes them a disruptive factor in issues relating to public space. ‘Rumours are unconfirmed information spreading through word of mouth, nowadays amplified by social media, acquiring, with time, force of truth,’ explains Michel Abo, sociologist and economist, researcher in economic sociology and Director of division at St. Joseph’s University, Lebanon. ‘Rumours might be spread in good faith by people who misread reality or perceive it in a special way. They can also be initiated purposefully in which case they are straight lies, or otherwise by people having an interest in revealing secret but genuine information. In the case of rumours concerning the public domain, it is always difficult to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Take the Dalieh example: the silence of the party accused of wanting to build on this beach is fueling the debate. This same debate will take a different turn once someone reveals the outlines of the project.’

Mohamed Zbeeb, journalist and co-founder of Mashaa, a group campaigning for the restoration of public space in Lebanon, believes rumours do play a role in such cases, but they are not the main factor that motivates the activists. ‘In the Dalieh case, for example, we are only motivated by the concept of the right to free access to the coast’, he says. ‘The system we live under is not a transparent one, it is true. There is practically no mechanism to search for truth, and activists are often confronted with a great quantity of data and/or rumours. But our opposition to this or that project is based on matters of principle’.

According to Zbeeb, rumours have, nonetheless, greatly affected campaigns for restoring public spaces through the targeting of public opinion. ‘For decades rumours have regularly been used to deter the public,’ he explains. ‘In order to be able to control Dalieh, the political party behind the companies that own the place has helped spread the idea that it is awash with drug dealers, prostitutes, rapists and street children. Dalieh was once a beloved venue for Beirut citizens, many of whom swam there until the late sixties. Then, during the war and the years that followed, this place gradually became isolated from the population, partly by the spreading of those rumours of lack of security there. This happened around the time the land was massively being bought up by these companies. Our response was to conduct a study which showed that the number of official complaints about events concerning this location was very low. The same method was used in relation to Horsh Beirut. The municipality still refuses to reopen this public garden under the pretext that it will attract illicit activities. The fact is that this garden is surrounded by popular neighbourhoods comprising communities from different communitarian backgrounds,'
How rumours are used as a political tool

Raja Noujaim, an activist who is involved in many of the issues mentioned above, argues that politicians and authorities conceal the truth and use rumours to manipulate the masses and to hinder the activists’ campaigns. ‘Many powerful individuals in the administration secretly work to ensure their interests, in spite of the fact that the law orders them to make their decisions public’, he says. ‘Rumours take over in the absence of precise information. It’s up to us to deal with such rumours and look for the truth from whistleblowers inside the administration who are dissatisfied with the officials’ behaviour. Or we can thwart their attempts through getting information provided by expert consultants, as is the case with the Fouad Boutros highway project that is going to lead to the destruction of many traditional neighbourhoods, and that is mainly promoted by the CDR and the Beirut municipal council.’

The Beirut municipal council is one of the official institutions involved in issues relating to public spaces in the capital. Hagop Terzian, member of the municipal council, categorically disagrees. ‘Rumours spread haphazardly; we don’t need to know who initiates them in order to respond to them properly’, says Michel Aby. ‘On the other hand, rumours in public affairs issues are closely linked with the people’s deepest preoccupations. Therefore, it is not easy to know how people perceive them and how they develop.’

He adds, ‘These adversaries are much more powerful than us. They also have much better access to the media. I believe that in certain instances, it is justified to fight them with their own weapon, provided the cause served is a noble one. For example, we might give the impression we are working on some issue while we are effectively putting all our efforts on another. In my view, in specific cases, we have no choice, they leave us no choice.’

Abir Saksouk is convinced, for her part, that the use of rumours by civil society organisations is never the best strategy. ‘I believe transparency and truth are much more efficient means’, she says. ‘We have many other tools at hand, starting with the judiciary and the laws. But I know that the civil campaign to preserve Dalieh is made up of very different people, and I respect everybody’s views.’

The difficulty of facing rumours

The vague nature of rumours and the uncertainty surrounding their origins make it difficult to respond to them. ‘Rumours spread haphazardly; we don’t need to know who initiates them in order to respond to them properly’, says Michel Aby. ‘On the other hand, rumours in public affairs issues are closely linked with the people’s deepest preoccupations. Therefore, it is not easy to know how people perceive them and how they develop.’

However, he admits that rumours may be the result of the ambiguous stance of the authorities who all refuse to take responsibility, she says. ‘When we first started discussing the case of Dalieh with the authorities, the minister of Environment as well as officials in the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) said that they were against building in this area and urged us to increase pressure on the Ministry of Interior. The latter, as well as the Directorate General of Urbanism and the municipal council of Beirut, denied any responsibility, thus making it difficult for us to face this “ghost issue.”’

She adds, ‘I also notice that rumours spread sometimes without being propelled by anybody. Our campaign is named after Dalieh el Raoucheh. That title was confused, in the minds of many people, with the “Pigeon’s Rocks” themselves. These people understandably came to think that a project was going to be carried out on the rocks themselves, which compelled them to react to the issue. It is disturbing to think, however, that most people would be more concerned about the protection of a national symbol, than about preserving their right to free access to a public beach.’

How rumours are used as a political tool

Rumours, in this sense, seem to be used as a political tool par excellence for influencing people’s views on public spaces, and for avoiding disturbing questions and debates.
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'Such issues are never a priority in a country continuously facing existential questions and serious security problems. It is no coincidence that the companies chose those troubled times to drag up this issue.'

Mohamed Zbeeb goes further into this line of thinking. As he puts it, our conception of public spaces, including public beaches, is marked by years of propaganda. Lebanese people have no problems believing rumours about the bad reputation of public places because the idea of safe public spaces was destroyed in their minds by a huge propaganda machine, he says.

Foreigners would be astonished to know that Lebanese people don’t have free access to the sea at any spot along a 240 kilometre long coastline, but the Lebanese find it very normal. They are isolated from this little beach that used to be so vital for the original population. Notice that sit-ins for other places like the Jesuit Garden have gathered more people because the residents felt more concerned with them.

Raja Noujaim has his own opinion on this. ‘I think people are not at present more conscious of their civil rights than they were before, but there are more professional activists on the ground; he says. ‘I think authorities and investors hide information and spread rumors hoping that those small groups of people will get tired and leave. Continuity, here, is the key for success.’

Is success in restoring public spaces possible in such a context? The activists are more or less optimistic. They point to public consciousness as a major factor in this matter; only progress at the popular level can compel the authorities to enforce the law for public good instead of privileging private interests through bypassing legislations. Only public consciousness can lessen rumour’s grip on people’s minds. Nevertheless, all this takes time. And in time will there be anything left to fight for?

1. All quoted speech is taken from original interviews conducted by the author.

The Phoenix

That information should be verified before publishing, and if that is not possible, at least flagged as ‘hearsay’ is not a modern concept only. See this lovely example of Herodotus, who in his writings about the Middle East’s flora and fauna also covered the Phoenix. While parts of the story are told as if talking about a real and not a mythic creature, he expresses his skepticism repeatedly, stressing that he could not confirm the bird’s existence and genesis with his own eyes but reports only on what people tell him.

‘They have also another sacred bird called the phoenix which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt, only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in five hundred years, when the old phoenix dies. Its size and appearance, if it is like the pictures, are as follow: The plumage is partly red, partly golden, while the general make and size are almost exactly that of the eagle. They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible: that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball, and puts his parent inside, after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first: so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun. Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird.’

Herodotus: The History of Herodotus, Translation: George Rawlinson, taken from The Internet Classics Archive.