Stick this ban in your pipe and smoke it

Public health
Lebanon outlawed cigarettes in cafés and restaurants six months ago, but owners routinely flout the law

By Abigail Fielding-Smith

Amid the noisy clatter of mezze plates being laid down inside a west Beirut restaurant, a woman lights up a cigarette, periodically resting it in one of the ashtrays placed on each table.

Six months in, such violations of Lebanon’s smoking ban are becoming an increasingly common sight.

When the law was introduced in September, people were surprised to find that the notoriously anarchic country was, generally speaking, implementing the ban. Now, however, after a decline in custom, some restaurants, bars and sheesha (water pipe) cafés have started to either flout or get around the law.

“We faced a lot of problems – we lost about 60 per cent of our turnover,” says the owner of a sheesha café in the Hamra district, as people puff away inside. Like others in the sector, he says the authorities are starting to tolerate violations of the law. “When pubs started closing, they felt it was not the right thing,” he says.

Ziad Kamel, treasurer of the syndicate of restaurant, café and nightclub owners in Lebanon, says that while European-style restaurants and bars have embraced the ban, many traditional restaurants and cafés have suffered badly. “Their business model is built around tobacco,” he says.

For Lebanese restaurants, the sheesha is seen as integral to the dining experience, Mr Kamel explains. “It creates a reason for people to go and hang out in these places.”

When the law came in, some restaurants bought expensive equipment that let in enough air for them to remain compliant even when customers were smoking inside. The Hamra branch of Costa Coffee spent about $180,000 on their renovations, according to a supervisor. And they do not solve the problem of what to do in winter. Others have started to allow smoking inside, sometimes opening doors and windows in a gesture towards compliance. Fines for breaking the law have been racking up but, according to Mr Kamel, most of these have not yet been processed – and when they are it is expected that many judges will be lenient.

One café owner says that some businessmen are bribing the police not to issue fines on their premises, or have scouts in the street ready to warn them if the police are coming.

The sector is lobbying for amendments to allow for exceptions to the ban, and Mr Kamel says that without these the ban cannot work. “It has become one of those laws that everyone disrespects... It is like going up a one-way street in certain neighbourhoods,” he says.

Rima Nakkash, a public health expert at the American University of Beirut and an advocate of the ban, rejects the case for “watering [it] down into a form which serves the tobacco industry and its allies”.

She also says improved public health brings economic benefits and that hospitality sector losses reflect the worsening political situation in Lebanon.

“Second-hand smoke from water pipes is as deadly as that of cigarette smoke,” she says. “Exceptions to the law will not protect customers nor the people working in those establishments from the toxic smoke.”

Right now, Lebanon’s politicians are preoccupied by rising sectarian tensions, the spillover effects from the civil war in neighbouring Syria and scheduled elections. As a result, Mr Kamel believes that for the time being, a status quo he characterises as “self-regulated, semi-turning a blind eye, semi-enforced” is likely to prevail. “No one wants to rock the boat,” he says.