Rent Control and the Politics of Eviction
October 29, 2014
Summary by Leila Kabalan

The new rent liberalization law in Lebanon has been the topic of discussion in the political, academic, and social spheres. It is rare to find a daily newspaper that does not have a featured analysis or piece on that topic. One of the crucial social aspects of this law is evicting old renters that were benefitting from rent caps that date back to the pre-civil war era. Those evictions have tremendous effect on the demographic change of Beirut’s social fabric. For this reason, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs in collaboration with the Legal Agenda hosted this talk covering the topic of rent control and the politics of eviction.

Who is getting evicted and how?

Data on the demographic characteristics of residents benefitting from the old rent-control law is lacking. Dr. Jad Chaaban, Assistant Professor of Economics at the American University of Beirut (AUB), said that no fair policy can be derived without proper data. One study conducted by AUB in 2009 found out that renters in the Ras Beirut area comprise 31% of total residents of Beirut. Out of those benefitting from the old rent-control law, 47% are elderly and 41% are women. Thus, the majority of residents covered under the old rent-control law are senior citizens. Chaaban argued that this is one of the key reasons why data is important for legislating a holistic housing policy rather than mere rent laws. The eviction of senior citizens cannot be done without consideration of their physical and mental health and the fact that they have become accustomed to their neighborhoods. Any eviction process into a newer –potentially suburban- neighborhood can easily jeopardize and disrupt their livelihoods and ease of access to basic services.

Ms. Nadine Bekdache, urban researcher and co-founder of Public Works, presented an anthropological exposé on illegal eviction practices in several neighborhoods across Beirut based on interviews with tenants. These methods include putting pressure on tenants through practices that put their safety at stake such as the demolition of adjacent buildings as well as water and electricity cuts. Overlooking these activities and the continuous postponement of a review of existing policies not only helps in aggravating the current crisis between the tenants and owners but also puts a vulnerable population in life-threatening situations. Bekdache cited the infamous example of the Fassouh Building in Ashrafieh collapsing on its residents.

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1 This summary draws heavily on the Symposium Recommendation document published by the Beirut Housing Blog. More can be found here- in Arabic

2 Municipality Ducks Responsibility for Building Collapse, Al-Akhbar Newspaper, January 2012
A rent law is not a housing policy

Mr. Nizar Saghieh, lawyer and founder of Legal Agenda, argued that the current stand-alone rent liberalization law without a comprehensive housing policy poses legalistic questions. The right to housing is a constitutional right and altering laws that guarantee it without offering alternatives is unprecedented and unconstitutional. Moreover, the state would be giving up on its role as a mediator leaving housing policies to be determined solely by market forces. Chabaan agreed that this is problematic since it not only creates social tension but also allows capitalistic real-estate developers to become the strongest player. To a certain extent, this scenario has already played out in several neighborhoods in Beirut where developers successfully bought plots that previously provided housing for middle to lower classes. Those plots turned into housing units that currently cater for an exclusive sector of the society. This has not only limited housing options for the middle income and poor residents but also changed the social and demographic fabric of the city.

The panelists agreed that a focus on new rent law in isolation from a comprehensive housing plan could not govern a city. The revision of the law governing the new leases, and the introduction of controls to ensure the rights of the new tenants is essential for achieving social justice in the city.