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Beirut demonstrators speak for Lebanese abroad ***Activists urge leaders to include expatriate voting in electoral law***

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BEIRUT: Dozens of professionals and activists demonstrated in front of the Foreign Affairs Ministry Wednesday in support of some 14,000 Lebanese living abroad who are demanding their right to vote while overseas.

The international committee of the Lebanese Living Abroad movement coordinated demonstrations in front of Lebanese consulates and embassies around the world, forming a "global day of solidarity." The activists held banners reading "support the right of the Lebanese living abroad to vote," and "just a box at the embassy."

Gebran Karam, co-founder and Lebanon's spokesperson for the movement said: "The Lebanese living abroad request their legitimate right to vote and to put an end to the disregard and indifference toward them."

He added: "They demand to be involved in major decisions concerning Lebanon by establishing in Lebanese embassies and consulates a structure allowing them to exert their legitimate voting rights."

Karam said the activists urged a number of Lebanese political leaders to adopt this idea, and that it was mainly the Free Patriotic Movement that had adopted the proposal, given that its leader, former General Michel Aoun, mentioned it in his political reform plan.

The movement - which launched an online petition from Paris two months ago signed by more than 14,000 people from 139 countries - is working closely with Chibli Mallat, a lawyer and democratic activist who has proposed a new addendum incorporating the right to vote abroad into the electoral law adopted for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Under Mallat's proposal, Lebanese living abroad who have a valid passport would have to register a week ahead of the elections in the nearest consulate or embassy where they would later cast their vote. This would allow for the relevant embassies to receive the electoral rolls on CD beforehand and properly account for the vote.

Mallat said: "The right to vote is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution. To facilitate its exercise for the many people living abroad represents a major democratic advance, one that is widely recognized throughout the world."

Mallat and Karam later handed Foreign Affairs Ministry secretary Butros Asaker a copy of the petition on behalf of the activists, insisting the decree "does not pose a problem beyond making the political will of the Lebanese leadership match the quality and demands of the democratic demonstrations that rocked Lebanon recently."

Asaker said: "The ministry's stance regarding this proposal is very positive and once the Parliament approves it, the ministry will make the necessary arrangements to implement it, from preparing ballot lists and ballot boxes to preparing statistics."

Jad Mokhbat, a physician taking part in the protest, said: "The Lebanese abroad are all very excited about the change that happened recently and are eager to participate in Lebanon's political life. It is their constitutional right and should not be taken away from them."

Nayla Camilleri, another activist said: "Most of my relatives live abroad and they are demanding their right to vote so I came to support their request."

Raya Mzanar, another protester, said: "Most Lebanese are concerned with the current political events and are seeking to participate in Lebanon's reform process. Their right to vote is constitutional and all it requires is to put a box in the embassies."