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## **Give Lebanese living abroad the chance to vote**

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**By Nada Abouzeid, Nasri Béjani, Gebran Karam, Chibli Mallat**

Lebanese citizens who find themselves abroad on election day cannot cast a ballot at home, even if their name is on the electoral rolls. They cannot vote even if they provide a power of attorney to someone, nor can they vote by correspondence, through the Internet, or at a Lebanese embassy or consulate. To return to Lebanon to vote, they must have time, health, ready means of transportation and money, so that only a tiny portion of overseas voters have the luxury of respecting their constitutional duty.

The continued disregard of the Lebanese authorities for this central issue is no longer acceptable, and stands in open violation to two clauses in the Constitution establishing a right for all Lebanese to vote, regardless of where they reside. In the preamble, Lebanon is declared "a democratic, parliamentary republic, founded on the respect of public freedoms, first and foremost the freedom of opinion and conscience; on social justice; and on the equality in all rights and duties between the citizens without any discrimination or preference."

Article 7 of the Constitution states that "all Lebanese are equal before the law. They equally benefit from civil and political rights, and are equally bound to public charges and duties, without any discrimination whatsoever." Both clauses, in underlining that citizens must not be discriminated against and benefit from equality in all rights and duties, clearly indicate that voters must be provided with the means to avoid such discrimination, including being able to choose their representatives. How is it possible to now redress this unconstitutional state of things?

Methods differ according to countries. In France voting can be delegated, so that a voter abroad can give someone in his district the right to cast a ballot in his stead. While this method does not offer the same conditions as a direct vote, it is easy to implement and provides the easiest mechanism for people who are briefly abroad at voting time. Safeguards can be introduced to avoid abuse and reinforce the legitimacy of the process.

There are also other means of voting abroad. For example, in some states of the United States, voting can be done by correspondence, or even through the Internet.

It is also possible to open voting centers abroad, as was done in the case of the Iraqi elections last January. This solution is preferable to delegation when it comes to preserving democratic principles, because it ensures the material connection between voters and their ballot, with their physical presence providing further witness to their attachment to constitutional duty. However, setting up overseas voting centers is more difficult to organize than voting by delegation, because it requires the availability of electoral rolls in embassies and consulates, which necessitates their close cooperation with the civil status authorities and the Interior Ministry back home.

In the case of Lebanon, voters are attached by law to their district of origin, in accordance with the civil status registers, not to their place of residence. This peculiarity forces a Lebanese residing abroad to be listed on the electoral rolls of his district of origin. Such rolls are available, and have even been placed on CDs. This makes it possible to organize voting in embassies and consulates for all those who have a valid passport.

It is sufficient, therefore, that the government approve a short addendum to the electoral law, regardless of the size of the voting districts that will be adopted for the upcoming parliamentary elections in May, incorporating the right to vote abroad into the law under discussion. Earlier this week, we urged a number of Lebanese political leaders to adopt this idea. Under the proposal, Lebanese living abroad would have to register a week ahead of the elections in the nearest consulate or embassy where they would cast their vote. Before then, the relevant embassies will have received the electoral rolls on CD to properly account for the vote.

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. More elaborate solutions could also be considered ahead of future elections, but the nonviolent revolution Lebanon recently engaged in demands an immediate enlargement of the democratic circle. This does not pose a problem beyond making the political will of the Lebanese leadership match the quality and demands of the democratic demonstrations.

More than 13,000 people have signed a petition spontaneously expressing their support for the right to vote overseas. Approving this measure would create a real link, at last, between Lebanese at home and abroad. Lebanon is proud of its diaspora, but has not provided those outside the country who are eligible to vote with the means to show their attachment to their homeland.

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