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More controversy over 'political conduct charter' of the Lebanese Christians

AsiaNews (09.03.2009) / HRWF (10.03.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Reaction continues, especially in Christian circles, to the "charter of political conduct" published on March 6 by the Maronite Church, in agreement with the other Lebanese Christian confessions. Yesterday, former president Amin Gemayel defended the value and significance of the document in the face of negative reactions from circles that, in his view, are aiming at "undermining" the foundations of the country, by attacking the patriarchate just as they do the army and state institutions.

In reality, the charter, seen in the perspective of the June elections, originated in recommendations from both the synod of the Maronite Church and the joint session of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Churches in March of 2008. It addresses ethics in the exercise of political power and the relationship of this power with the Church, considers the room for collaboration, affirms the principle of state secularism, emphasizing mutual independence, and stresses the relations between political action and human dignity, human rights, and the common good.

Noting that political life has "deviated" from the right path, and that it is necessary to correct its course, the charter aims at making politicians aware of their responsibilities and defining the criteria - and this is the part that has prompted the greatest opposition - that should guide citizens in choosing their political representatives, in order to control their activity and hold them accountable.

In the first part, the charter defines the principles relative to politics, considered as "a noble art in the service of man and of the common good," to the relationship between Church and state, to the participation of citizens in political life. The second part is dedicated to Lebanon, as a country with its own specificity and its own values, its formula of coexistence, its shared responsibility in the construction of a civil and democratic state. The third part, finally, elaborates the principles already stated and enumerates the rules of political action.

Among other things, it affirms that "there exist principles on which democratic practice is founded. These are: truth, from which descends the relationship between the leaders and the citizens; transparency and impartiality in public administration; respect for the rights of political adversaries; protection of the rights of the accused who are victims of arbitrary sentencing; the proper use of public funds; the rejection of wrongful and illicit means in order to gain, preserve, and increase one's own power at all costs, to the detriment of the common good."

There is also a clarification concerning Lebanon's "specificity" as a "parliamentary democratic republic, founded on respect for public freedoms, chief among which is freedom of opinion and conscience, on social justice and equality of rights and duties among all citizens, without distinctions or preferences." "No legitimacy is granted to an

authority that contradicts the pact of common life. The definitive character of the Lebanese nation places before all Lebanese who are at its foundation a sacred duty, which is that of defending its independence, its full sovereignty, the freedom of its children to make their own fundamental decisions and to confront any attempt of occupation of its territory and of threat to its sovereignty."

Lebanon 'moves right way' on ID

BBC (24.02.2009) / HRWF (03.03.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A recent decree by the Lebanese government has allowed its citizens to remove their religious affiliation from the identity cards. The BBC's Natalia Antelava, in Beirut, considers how the move will affect a divided country.

In a country that has lived through years of civil war, and that is still deeply divided along religious lines, many see this decision as a very symbolic, and a very important step towards much needed unity and national reconciliation.

Plenty of people in Lebanon still remember the days when the ID cards they carried served as potential death warrants.

During the civil war, which lasted through the 1970s and 1980s, different militias aligned with various religious groups would set up checkpoints and ask for the identity cards of those who tried to pass.

People would often be shot on the spot if their documents revealed the "wrong" sort of religious affiliation.

"These identity cards killed so many people," says Samer Juidi, a 21-year-old business marketing student in Beirut.

"I want to be seen as Lebanese. Not Lebanese Christian, not Lebanese Muslim but just Lebanese," he adds.

Welcome symbolism

By comparison to Lebanon of his parents' youth, the country where Samer lives today is much more stable and much less violent.

But religious affiliation still governs the life of every citizen here.

Lebanon's entire society, and its political system, is divided along sectarian lines: a Sunni Muslim in Lebanon could become a prime minister but never a president because that position is reserved for Maronite Christians.

The speaker of the parliament can only be Shia Muslim. And when Lebanese citizens want to marry, divorce or adopt, or when they register a birth or a death, they have to refer to courts that are run by the religious sects to which they belong.

There is no such thing as a civil court here, and that is why human-rights groups say the government's decision regarding the ID cards is a welcome - but purely symbolic - step.

"The entire Lebanese system will still be premised on one's religious confession," says Nadim Houry of the lobby group Human Rights Watch.

"So even if you chose to remove it from your documents, they will still know what it is, and they will keep roll of that confession otherwise they will not know how to marry you, how to divorce you.

"And that's why symbolically this decision is important, but it's also only cosmetic."

Human and civil-rights groups here are campaigning for a unified civil code, under which representatives of all of the country's religious groups will be treated equally.

But for Lebanon that kind of law still seems to be a long way away.
