

Table of Contents

- ***Hotchpotch of religious laws restricts basic rights***
 - ***Bomb explosion in Lebanon church***
 - ***Christian Minorities seek their first-ever portfolio in new Cabinet***
-

Hotchpotch of religious laws restricts basic rights

Integrated Regional Information Networks (19.07.2011) / HRWF (29.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – The demand for equal religious, gender and other treatment for all Lebanese citizens has gained pace with some saying the time has come to review laws that confer inequality, especially on women.

"As a women, I am not equal to my brother, husband or male friend," Rita Chemaly, a researcher and women's activist in the capital Beirut, said. "My state doesn't guarantee my rights. The constitution says that all Lebanese are equal, yet the laws do not [guarantee this]."

Lebanon has a system that allocates political power through quotas for all officially recognized religious sects. Three religions are officially recognized including the Christian faith, Islam and the Jewish faith. Within these are at least 16 sects, namely Sunni, Shia, Alawi, Druze, Ismaili, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Melkite Catholic, Nestourian (Assyrian Orthodox), Caledonian, Latin, Evangelist, Coptic and Jewish confessions.

While the constitution stipulates that "all Lebanese are equal before the law and...without discrimination enjoy civil and political rights", the country lacks a legal system that grants equal rights and obligations to all citizens. For example, personal and family matters are handled through religious laws and courts, varying from one sect to the other.

Druze, Shiite and Sunni lawmakers interpret Islamic Shariah law differently, while Christian communities apply different versions of canon law. Across the board, many laws and practices do not treat women and men equally. Parliamentary seats, too, are allocated on the basis of religion, with the highest political positions reserved for candidates from specific sects.

"How can a religious authority protect my rights? They are priests and sheikhs, not policemen," said Chemaly. "We need an equal citizenship, and equality between men and women. Right now, we don't have that. I'm not a full citizen in my own country."

Demo for a secular Lebanon

The demands peaked on 20 March, when an estimated 30,000 men and women took part in a Beirut protest. This was the largest of a number of demonstrations calling for a secular Lebanon.

"I feel insulted by this," Micheline, a student told IRIN. "The idea is that I don't have the same capacity as men. The different religious legislations discriminate against women without exception. The real problem is the religious authorities. This is where the power lies. But they're used to having a lot of influence in society, so giving that up will not come easy."

Observers note that personal status law differs greatly between the different religious law systems. Catholic Christian men and women are not allowed to divorce, while Greek-Orthodox, Sunni, Shia and Druze couples may. Within all sects, however, the conditions for divorce are different for women and men. Sunni and Shia men also have the legal possibility to marry up to four women. Muslim women don't have this right.

The age for marriage also differs between the sects, although all stipulate a lower age for women than for men. For Christians, the legal age is 17 for men and 15 for women. Sunni and Druze men must be 18 and women must be 17, whereas Shiite law says men and women must have reached "maturity". In all communities though, younger men and women might be granted legal permission to marry with their guardian's consent.
Mixed marriages

Another law that local Lebanese are up against is one that disallows marriage between people from different confessions. Lebanon lacks common marriage legislation, so many religiously mixed couples (or those who do not want a religious ceremony) marry in other countries, especially in nearby Cyprus.

Another issue is that of inheritance where Christian men and women can inherit equally, but Sunni and Shiite brothers inherit twice as much as sisters.

"I would prefer a system where religious law doesn't rule," said Lina, a young Lebanese business woman. "We are many religious groups in this country, but we all belong to the same state, the same culture. We are all Lebanese. Secular legislation would make it easier to interact between the sects."

According to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Lebanese women are victims of gender discrimination and the country should "urgently adopt a unified personal status code which is in line with the Convention and would be applicable to all women in Lebanon, irrespective of their religion."

Bomb explosion in Lebanon church

AFP (27.03.2011) / HRWF (30.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A bomb exploded on Saturday (26/3) night at the entrance to a church in the town of Zahle, eastern Lebanon, no casualties, said a church official said Sunday.

The bomb, estimated to weigh two kilograms of explosives placed at the side entrance to St Mary's Church, a Syrian Orthodox church, said pastor Youstinios Safar Boulos told AFP.

The bomb went off at 04:15 local time (08:15 GMT), damaging a section of the church doors and benches inside and the altar, says Safar.

Seven cars parked nearby were also destroyed. No one claimed responsibility for the blast.

"I condemn this attack and urged people to remain calm," said Safar, who is from Syria and the bishop of Zahle, a city inhabited by many Christians around 50km from the capital Beirut.

He said the plan will hold a worship service Sunday at the church in spite of the attacks.

The church was located in industrial areas Zahle, in which seven citizens of Estonia were kidnapped earlier this week by armed men. The officials did a search operation against the victims but so far can not find the people who kidnapped it.

Christian Minorities seek their first-ever portfolio in new Cabinet

By Van Meguerditchian

The Daily Star (01.03.2011) / HRWF (02.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Lebanon has its sectarian minorities, and then it has its Minorities.

Under the country's sectarian political system, the total population of the Minorities, which are comprised of six different Christian sects, qualifies them for a single parliamentary seat, currently located in Beirut and held by MP Nabil de Freige, in the 128-member legislature.

After Najib Mikati was designated as prime minister, the government formation process revived the communities' long-standing demand: a portfolio in the next Cabinet, which would constitute the first-ever Minorities minister.

In 2009, when Saad Hariri's government was formed, and no Minorities member was named, the Syriac Union Party conducted a noisy street demonstration near its headquarters in Jdeideh.

This time around, the Minorities communities are facing a new wrinkle: competition from the Free Patriotic Movement, according to a leading Syriac figure.

Ibrahim Mrad, who heads the Syriac Union Party, said that the name which is currently being reported in the media as a possible Cabinet member represents the FPM and not the Minorities communities.

"Unfortunately, we are seeing a name put forward by Michel Aoun in the media as the figure that would represent the Minorities who does not have any constituency within the sect," Mrad told The Daily Star at the headquarters of the Syriac Union Party in Jdeideh, Metn.

According to Mrad, the name being discussed in the negotiations between Mikati and Aoun is Habib Frem, the secretary-general of the League of Christians in Lebanon.

"Although we respect Frem, we object to the way his name was forced upon our community without consulting the Syriac Union Party or the various Minorities communities' religious leaders," said Mrad.

Earlier this month, a delegation that included his party and the League of Levantine Christians headed to Baabda Palace and met with President Michel Sleiman to convey their objections.

"We told the president that we won't accept any forced designation of a minister acting as if he represents the Christian Minority sects," Mrad said.

The party has also requested an appointment with Mikati to discuss the matter, but Mrad said that no date had been set by Mikati's office.

In the wake of political bickering that brought down Hariri's Cabinet last month and saw Mikati tasked with forming a new Cabinet with a new March 8 majority, some media reports have indicated that Aoun would include a minister from the ranks of the Minorities to widen his influence in these Christian communities.

And in a further twist, Mrad said March 14's decision Sunday to stay out of the next government was preferable to seeing a Minorities minister being named by either of the rival sides.

"Our sect should only join the Cabinet through a technocrat minister within the president's share," Mrad added, irrespective of the fact his party is a member of March 14.

Asked if he fears his community would pay the price in a possible deal between Sleiman and Aoun over portfolios in the government, Mrad said any such deal was a possibility, due to "the use of weapons."

"Everyone has seen recently how even the biggest sect in Lebanon [the Sunnis] was subject to compromise and marginalization through force and intimidation," Mrad added.

In addition to calling for a minister in the executive branch, Mrad said efforts were under way to pass a legislative draft law before the 2013 parliamentary elections that would grant the Syriac sects two seats.

The draft would add four new MPs overall, bringing the total number of lawmakers to 132.

The 1989 Taif Agreement increased the number of seats from 99 to 128, divided equally between Christians and Muslims. However, the Protestant, Armenian Catholic and Minorities' allocations of one seat each did not see an increase when the new seats were added.

"Our 30,000 [Syriac] constituents in Beirut deserve to be represented politically both in Parliament and the Cabinet," said Mrad.

Meanwhile, the Alawi sect, with fewer constituents, received two parliamentary seats under Taif.

Mrad said the Syriac Union Organization, which became a political party in 2008, worked on a draft law in collaboration with MP De Freij and proposed it to lawmakers during their first session after the formation of Hariri's Cabinet. If the draft law ever passes, it doesn't mean that the current sect occupying the seat, which is not Syriac Orthodox, would necessarily lose out.

De Freij, elected in Beirut's District 2, is a member of the Latin Rite Roman Catholic Church, known as Lateen in Arabic, as opposed to the much larger Melkite "Greek Catholics," which are referred to as Catholic.

"The one seat allotted to the rest of the sects considered 'Minorities' would remain, if the new draft law passes in a vote in the Parliament [and it] would add a Syriac Catholic seat in Zahle and an Orthodox one in Beirut," Mrad said.

Two other Muslim seats would be added under the draft, one Sunni and one Shiite.

Lawmakers failed to vote on the draft law due to the climate of political division in the country.

“Speaker Nabih Berri tossed the draft law into his drawer and has not called for any other legislative session since then,” said Mrad, a Syriac Orthodox and a resident of Beirut.

Mrad said his party had also requested the Interior Ministry to amend the official term “Other Christian Minorities” as a catch-all label for the small sects, since it is an Ottoman expression.

The party that Mrad leads today is also active throughout Europe, thanks to waves of Christian emigrants abroad. In Lebanon, though, it remains focused on the tangible demand of finally getting a Minorities Cabinet seat. It is a glaring gap, especially since the Armenian Catholics and Protestants, which also have one seat in Parliament, have each fielded ministers, respectively Jack Jokhadarian, and the late Basel Fleihan, after the Civil War.

“Although we started to demand our rights forcefully after Taif, it remains sad that our constant participation in parliamentary and municipal elections has not yet allowed us to achieve true representation,” Mrad said.
