

The electoral test in Beirut

by Chibli Mallat

The municipal elections in Beirut conjure up two types of contextual reflection. One is general and relates to the voting process in the region. The other is more parochial and results from observing the conduct of the electoral preparations and the candidates and their lists in Beirut.

To put the importance of the elections in Beirut in a Middle Eastern context, two examples from the Gulf might be helpful. The first is Saudi Arabia, since one of the most important occasions of political life in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia are the elections of officials to the chamber of commerce in Jeddah. Why do these elections carry so much importance politically? After all, such an event is not particularly important in terms of the chamber's powers, nor is the election significant enough nationally in terms of candidates, let alone in terms of the number of voters and their representativity of the population at large. The answer is in the context.

In a large and increasingly sophisticated country, 1992 was the first occasion for a Saudi citizen to cast his vote since the Ottoman elections to the *majlis-e mab'uthan* in 1908. Despite the obvious constraints on the electoral process in terms of its restriction to male candidates and to an extremely small number of voters, it constituted a major way for citizens who are otherwise bereft of the fundamental right to choose their representatives freely.

In other words, in a region where voting freely is an exception, the citizens will exercise their fundamental rights whenever they have a chance.

The electoral process is always dependent on context. The freer the instance, as compared to more constrained processes, the more significant the occasion.

This was also evident, across the Gulf, in the case of the victory of Mohammad

Khatami on May 23 of last year. In those elections, most remarkable was the popular investment in the one candidate who appeared to stand for some opposition to the regime. And yet the process was extremely constrained, in the sense that the slate was reduced by the council of guardians from 238 candidates to four. No self-respecting country would allow an unelected body like the council of guardians to intervene in such an anti-democratic manner. Still, the people went for it, seized the opportunity and brought Khatami to power.

So whether in Iran, at the level of the presidency, or in Saudi Arabia, at the level of Jeddah's chamber of commerce, the people are clamouring for their fundamental right to freely elect their representatives. Lebanon is not dissimilar in this respect and the enthusiasm for the latest electoral consultation

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(however minor it appears in municipal, as opposed to parliamentary or presidential elections) is one further example of the yearning for democratic space, even if that space is relative, and even if it might appear insignificant in a theoretical context.

Locally, context bears on Sunday's elections in Beirut in two ways. In the first place, the process has so far been open enough and appears to have been free from the type of interference which characterised the construction of lists in the parliamentary consultation of 1996 and the shadowy manner in which the presidential election will take place later this year – that is, if it is allowed to take place. So those who can vote should vote. The occasion is better for freedom than any one preceding it since the end of the war.

In the second place, one should try to enhance the value of the consultation in Beirut which – by sheer size – is the most important in the country, by voting for those candidates who have something to say.

This brings up the major flaw in the conduct of those who, with the prime minister, are trying to reduce the electoral process to a so-called "unanimous" or "compromise" list. The search for such a list is intrinsically flawed, as is evidenced by the impossibility of reaching consensus in the last week without sacrificing the most important item in the electoral choice: the agenda in case of victory.

It is heartening to watch, against this flawed compromise trend in the largest city, the formation of a slate such as "the Beirut list", which projects itself as the bearer of an agenda. At least there is something to be

read, analysed and appreciated – even if it would have been preferable to see the outline of the existing programme in the shape of an elaborate study of grievances and solutions, which would have constituted a more comprehensive and reasoned agenda for voters to appreciate the candidates.

But there is no doubt that, unlike the rest of the leaflets produced – if any – the outline of the Beirut list is well-informed and comes as a realistic balance between an appreciation of Beirut à la Nadia Tueini – Beirut as the historical bearer of freedom in the region – and a keen sense for repairing the city's downward trend after years of irresponsible and haphazard drifting.

So vote if you can and vote for the better programme. No doubt, the success of an agenda-driven list will give room for thought to those who believe in freedom and responsible government, from Rabat to Tehran.

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cle was contributed to T.*