

INDEX ON CENSORSHIP

05/00  
**INDEX**  
ON CENSORSHIP  
for free expression



NOAM CHOMSKY. STAN COHEN. ROY GREENSLADE. JEREMY HARDING. EDWARD SAID

URING



CHIBLI MALLAT

## Trouble with the neighbours

**For much of its modern history, Lebanon's fate has been in the hands of its neighbours. The recent election results – a rejection of Syrian control – suggests the population wants to take charge of its own destiny**

The first recognisable constitutional structure of Lebanon, the *mutasarrifiyye* in Mount Lebanon, was created in 1861. It owed its existence to an agreement between the European powers and the waning Ottoman Empire. After WWI, Lebanon emerged as a French colony, part of the French-British division of the colonial spoils in the Levant. In 1943, it owed its rapid, almost painless independence to the collapse of French rule in the Levant at the time of the Nazi occupation of France. While external events might have been less influential between 1943 and 1975, the collapse of the state during the civil war (1975-1989) allowed regional factors in the shape of the Arab-Israeli conflict, plus the second Gulf War, to play a dominant role once more. The Taif agreement of 1989 that ended the civil war fits into this pattern. Taif redefined the constitutional balance of power in the community-based system, but its implementation was subject to differing interpretations, and key domestic and regional measures were ignored.

A decade on, nothing much has changed: regional and international powers continue to assert their influence. Despite the withdrawal of Israel and the subsequent collapse of the South Lebanese Army (SLA) in May this year, the US continues to play a role. However, it is the influence of Syria that has been most significant with the lack of freedom and political representation common in Damascus gradually being mirrored in Beirut.

## IN DANGER OF PEACE: INTERNAL POLITICS

Lebanon has long prided itself on its respect for free expression. While the room for manoeuvre is still wider than in most Arab countries, it is narrower than at any time since independence. True, there are no acknowledged prisoners of conscience, the government has licensed a regional office of Amnesty International and the Beirut press remains the boldest in the Arab world. Email, now accessible to most educated Lebanese, delivers a wealth of information from around the world almost instantaneously; a wide array of institutions of education and public outlets in several languages keeps Lebanon at the forefront of multiculturalism. Local television, however, has been outstripped in free expression by independent satellite broadcasters in the Gulf.

But censorship has tightened, a number of former political figures remain *persona non grata* in the country and tolerance for the criticism of public figures is lower than at any time in recent years. Raymond Eddé, a leading political figure since independence, was forced into exile where he died this year. This epitomises the difficulties encountered by leaders who are not prepared to toe the line imposed by the regional powers.

There are two main constraints on free expression: the self-censorship that curtails any criticism of the president or his counterparts in the Arab world; and traditional curbs on dissent and protest. Censors prevent books from being shipped in and distributed, other works of cultural expression are subject to the censor's scissors. Harsh punishments, including beating and imprisonment, are often meted out to student protests, though protestors seldom remain in prison for long. The judiciary is constrained by its fragmented nature, a characteristic that has allowed military tribunals to dominate the judicial process as happened recently with the trials of former members of the South Lebanese Army.

As a result, the most trenchant criticism of government has appeared in circles that are not directly political, specifically among Christian religious and educational institutions, the leaders of which are relatively sheltered by the institutions they head. The rest of society is more circumspect; serious dissent is left to expatriate Lebanese.

The fetters on free expression affect the outcome of elections. Lebanon has held several elections over the past decade at municipal, parliamentary and presidential levels: parliamentary in 1992 and 1996; in 1995 and 1998, in accordance with the constitution, parliament elected a new president. In all four cases, Syrian influence was paramount.

Constitutionally, the democratic credentials of the election of the