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'WE MUST FOCUS ON SURVIVAL AS A COMMUNITY'

Lebanon's women lose political ground

After Lebanon's long civil war and political turbulence, involvement in politics still means playing by sectarian rules. Women's rights come only after community, religion and cultural identity

BY DON DUNCAN

WOMEN lost out big time in the elections in Lebanon in June (1). There were a mere six women MPs out of 128 in the Lebanese parliament. Now there are only four. Lina Abou-Habib, director of the Centre for Research and Training on Development Action, says: "It was a major, major setback for women, in terms of representation. But also because the women who do enter parliament do so through patriarchal channels."

Lebanese women were given the vote in 1952 (Israel granted suffrage in 1948 and Syria in 1949). Since then, empowerment has progressed in education and business. Female attendance at Lebanon's universities has climbed steadily and at the American University of Beirut (AUB) more than half the students are now female. "The trend is moving upwards in terms of numbers, impact, positions they occupy and the rate at which they are entering the world of business," says George K Naajar, Dean of AUB's business school. "I think we are moving very fast towards a world of equality, where women are given their due and this is nobody's favour, they have earned it."

Laws introduced after the end of the civil war in 1990, relaxing restrictions on women entering business, mean there are more female entrepreneurs and more women reaching the upper echelons of the corporate sectors, especially banking and communications. But this has been matched by a regression in politics. With only 3.1% of seats now occupied by women, Lebanon is at the bottom of the table of parliamentary representation of women in the Middle East, down with conservative Gulf states like Oman (none), Yemen (0.3%) and Bahrain (2.7%) (2). Whereas neighbouring Syria has 12.4%, Tunisia has 22.8% and Iraq has a 25% quota for women.



Minority representation

Strida Geagea is pushing for a quota of women MPs to be included in Lebanon's parliamentary reforms / © Don Duncan

Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war and other domestic tumults slowed political advancement for women: the volatilities of sectarian political culture came before women's rights. "The issue then was how to help Lebanon and how to save Lebanon from those difficult times. It was all-consuming," says Strida Geagea, one of Lebanon's women MPs.

Women in Lebanon regularly come to power in mourning clothes, stepping into a seat vacated by an assassinated father or spouse. The newly elected MP Nayla Tueni, 26, is the daughter of Gibran Tueni, a former MP and editor of the daily *An Nahar*, who was killed in 2005. Strida Geagea was thrust into politics when her husband, the Christian leader Samir Geagea, was imprisoned for 11 years during Syria's occupation of Lebanon.

Hard times

"Lebanon has passed through extremely difficult times," said Geagea at her home in east Beirut, among portraits of herself and her husband set against Lebanese flags or mountain landscapes. "And throughout those times, Lebanese women were on the front lines as activists." Geagea led the campaign for her husband's release, keeping his incarceration on the political agenda and in the public consciousness. But it was her husband's name rather than her activism that won her a seat in parliament.

"I think this parliament is as conservative, patriarchal and removed from women's rights as its predecessors," said Lina Abou-Habib. "We need more women in parliament. But you have to ask yourself, would the four women elected be there now if they had different family names?" All of them come from political dynasties. Female political engagement also tilts disproportionately to the Christian population, which represents about a third of the country. Only one of the four is Muslim – Bahia Hariri – and she comes from a powerful political family. She is the sister of assassinated former prime minister Rafik Hariri, and aunt to the current prime minister-designate, Saad Hariri.

Yet women's engagement in politics at grass roots and university levels is high. The Christian parties have the highest and fastest-growing numbers of female participation; some parties' youth branches have female membership rates of up to 40%. "In Lebanon, everything is politics, even in school," says Yara Boutros, 19, a Christian and a business student at Saint Joseph University in Beirut.

She is a member of the Christian Kataeb Party youth branch and she sits on their university committee: 10 people each representing one of Lebanon's universities. Every Thursday, it meets in a basement room at the Kataeb headquarters in east Beirut. Boutros is one of the two female members. "It's at this level and that of local activism that there are the most encouraging signs for women," says Abou-Habib.

Sectarian rules

Even so, getting involved in politics means learning to play by its sectarian rules: community, religion and cultural identity come first. "I'd love to have the same rights as men, but it's not my goal," says Boutros. "My identity is first Lebanese, then Christian. I don't see myself as a woman in political terms. Right now I'm fighting for a country that hasn't really emerged from war, so before thinking about being a woman or a man, we must focus on survival as a community."

Many of these parties had their roots as militias in the civil war. The Lebanese Forces, a Christian party headed by Strida Geagea's husband, began as a militia to protect Christians during the war. The Kataeb party, of which Boutros is a member, was founded more than 70 years ago but also developed its own militia (the Phalange) during the civil war. While the Taif accords, signed in 1989, ended that war and took guns out of politics, with the exception of Hizbullah, many of these parties are still militaristic in their structure and attitude to gender. "The party was more military than political," says Ziad Chalhoub, 24, who heads the committee that Boutros sits on. "That affects the role of women in political life: for women don't have a military tendency."

"We are working on deep reform in the party, and democratisation... to have a Kataeb party that can speak to the younger generation," says Sami Gemayel, a newly elected MP on the Kataeb party ticket and a graduate of its youth branch. Younger politicians feel compelled to speak of reform and gender equality. But Gemayel embodies the obstacles to change: he is the most recent Gemayel (perhaps Lebanon's best known political dynasty) to enter politics. His grandfather Pierre founded the Kataeb party in 1932 and his uncle Bashir was president in 1982 before being assassinated (making him an icon among Christians). His father Amine was president from 1982-8 and is now head of the Kataeb party. Sami, who is 29, and Nayla Tueni may bring a progressive rhetoric, but the core of Lebanese politics remains unchanged: patriarchal and nepotistic clan values live on.

The only moves for legislative reforms to open real opportunity for women come from a few MPs, among them Geagea. Lebanon's new government is expected to pass reforms to current electoral law during its four-year mandate and Geagea will push to include a quota for women MPs as part of those reforms. She declined to specify what percentage would be appropriate. (Morocco and Jordan have quotas of 9.2% and 5.5%.) Geagea says that increasing female parliamentary representation cannot happen naturally and forceful measures are now required. "Though this is not the best way to promote women's rights because it's a kind of segregation towards them, we have to do it this way for perhaps two parliamentary terms so that people can get used to seeing women in government."

Lebanon's current political stability could allow progress on the issue of women's representation. But any increase of tensions or a return to violence would force women's issues back down the agenda. June's elections, Lebanon's most tightly fought ever, proved this. "When the going gets tough, you're going to get rid of the most disposable," says Abou-Habib, "and what is disposable in the patriarchal system is women."