

## Diaspora voting may be feasible in 2013

By Livia Murray

BEIRUT: While Lebanese expatriates have long maintained close economic and cultural ties with their home country, they were finally granted the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 2008 – and were told that the process wasn't ready for them in time for the polls that took place the following year.

Although the government is legally bound to provide a way for Lebanese expatriates to vote overseas, with the elections of 2013 just two years away, some politicians, government officials and civil society groups are worried that the out-of-country voting won't be ready in time.

The electoral law adopted in 2008 states that “every Lebanese whose name appears in the electoral rolls has the right to vote by registering at the Lebanese Embassy or Consulate at the place of his residency abroad.”

Recent numbers from a survey conducted by the Foreign Ministry, however, show that out of the approximately 1.2 million Lebanese living overseas who are eligible, only around 3,000 have registered at their embassies to vote.

After being informed of the figure last week during a meeting at the ministry, Kesrouan MP Nehmtallah Abi Nasr argued that the Lebanese diaspora was in danger of missing out once again on the chance to vote.

But in an interview Thursday, Haitham Joumaa, director general of the Foreign Affairs Ministry's Expatriates Department, said the ministry was ready to hold voting abroad and had prepared a “detailed” mechanism to that end.

“If we are told that elections will be held three months from now, we are ready to hold out-of-country voting – if the cost of this process is covered and if we are provided with the sufficient personnel and other needs,” he said.

Joumaa said the survey by the ministry had polled every Lebanese embassy and consulate throughout the world, adding that an estimated number of 4 million expatriates have Lebanese nationality, though only those 21 years of age and over are eligible to vote.

“We have all the required details, such as, for example, what states do not allow nationals who also hold a Lebanese passport to take part in Lebanon's elections,” he said.

“We figured out that around 1.2 million of Lebanese expatriates are eligible to vote,” he said, though this is only an approximation because not all expatriates register at their embassies.

According to former Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud, the Foreign Ministry has yet to launch a serious voter registration campaign abroad.

“We are not going into registration yet. If you want to have figures and numbers [the ministry] should launch a campaign for people to register,” he said. While ministry officials have been gathering numbers, a public relations campaign has yet to be undertaken.

Baroud also said the current figure of registered voters was not a serious issue at the moment because the date of elections is still far away: The deadline to vote in the 2013 parliamentary elections is Dec. 31, 2012.

But the Foreign Ministry already postponed the launch of overseas voting once before.

“The Foreign Ministry submitted to the former Cabinet a report in 2009 on the feasibility of out-of-country voting and apparently it was negative. They said it was not feasible and that they needed more time,” said Baroud.

The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections is one of the groups working to ensure that the out-of-country voting is not delayed a second a time. LADE contacted the Foreign Ministry several months ago concerning a report on out-of-country voting but received one response only Thursday.

Hasan Cherry, communication officer at LADE, stressed the importance of having a mechanism to apply the law.

“Every law, after being approved by Parliament, needs practical steps to be implemented,” he said.

Though the Foreign Ministry did not go into details about the mechanisms it has in place, a number of research centers, including LADE, have been working on the logistics.

Zeina Awar, communication and networking manager at LADE, outlined a basic mechanism for out-of-country voting. Members of the Lebanese community register in person or by mail in the embassies of their countries of residence. The lists are then sent to Lebanon, and the Interior and the Foreign Affairs ministries make preparation for voting, by setting up polling stations and sending employees to count the votes and pre-printed ballots. The voting would occur 10 days prior to the election in Lebanon and the results would be released at the same time.

But there are still debates on the best way to move forward. In October, Notre Dame University, which is also working on the issue of out-of-country voting, will publish a report on the subject.

According to Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, chair of the Political Science Department at NDU, the report will cover issues such as voting by mail-in absentee ballot or at the embassy, whether the Lebanese can vote only in national or in local elections, whether there should be reserved seats for diaspora, and whether the election should be monitored through a neutral body or through the government.

Sensenig-Dabbous expressed hope that this research will put pressure on the government to implement overseas voting by 2013.

“We want to stop them from ignoring the topic,” he said.

Lebanon would not be the first country to hold elections for emigrants abroad. It has been carried out successfully by many other countries in the past, including Iraq, which held out-of-country voting in the 2010 elections – ironically, the overseas voting for Iraqis also took place in polling stations in Lebanon.

According to Baroud, the cost of out-of-country voting shouldn't present an obstacle. He explained that experts from the EU and U.N. pegged the amount at around \$50,000 per embassy.

"It's not a huge amount of money," he said.

Beyond money and logistics, there is the matter of election outcomes. A new mass of voters could carry enough votes to change the course of electoral races.

"Certain political figures and families have been elected for generations. I think if we implemented out-of-country voting in the upcoming elections the results would be changed," said Cherry.

Sensenig-Dabbous said that implementing voting abroad could break traditional ties to political parties.

"Lebanese tend to be very loyal based on family lines – at least the first generation – for instance by supporting the political party that your family decided to support. Lebanese down the line, second or third generation have a more individualistic lifestyle," he said.

Baroud said that implementing voting for the diaspora could put a strain on political parties by forcing them into a worldwide electoral campaign.

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