

## They have a voice, too



A Lebanese-French citizen votes in the French elections from Beirut in April. Lebanon needs to enact a law allowing expats to vote in the 2013 Lebanese elections. (AFP photo)

With Lebanon's politicians currently bickering over the minutiae of a new electoral law, it is essential that we follow up on one that has already been ratified, that of allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote in parliamentary elections, and the obligation of the Foreign Ministry to ensure that the administrative mechanisms are in place so that this process can happen in the 2013 polls.

President Michel Suleiman summed it up eloquently when, speaking at an event in Byblos last week, he demanded, "How can we ask so much from the expatriates without giving them anything back in return?" He was of course reminding us that one of the cornerstones of the Lebanese economy is founded on foreign remittances, which make up roughly 30 percent of the country's GDP.

A law was passed in 2008, and now all that is required of Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour is to issue an edict to all embassies instructing them to prepare for polling day. Mansour has been dragging his heels and has even argued that the majority of Lebanese who live abroad are not interested in having their say in the democratic process. Quite how he reached this conclusion is anyone's guess, and in any case, the level of enthusiasm should not be an issue. The law has been passed, and it requires Mansour to do his job. It would be a scandal if a community that plows an estimated \$12 billion into the country is denied a say in that country's future because of ministerial negligence.

The expatriate vote is important on many levels. Not only does it allow Lebanese to exercise their democratic right, it will surely inject fresh life into the electoral process. The expatriate community, by its very nature, has been exposed to different systems and cultures. Many live in countries that pride themselves on transparency. They will have been part of national debates on meaningful issues and they will have experienced what it means for a government to be held accountable for its election promises. They know there is more to an election than just showing up and voting for a candidate because he tarmacs a road a month before polling day, and they have no doubt seen elections in which people go to the polls without first demanding payment.

Maybe it is because the expatriate community will not necessarily follow blindly, that it cannot be shepherded or coerced, that there is little appetite for facilitating its participation. But as Suleiman pointed out, in this globalized society this just won't wash any more.

"Allowing them to vote is not aimed at reversing equations in Lebanon or creating sectarian alignments," he said. And of course he is right. Lebanon cannot just look democratic. It has to be infused with the spirit of democracy. There needs to be more emphasis placed on the issues that affect our day-to-day lives - water, electricity, security, civil marriage and the economy.

But the parties don't feel the need to address them. Clearly they think their votes are already in the bag no matter what. In 2005, Executive, the Lebanese business monthly, ran a feature over two issues in which it asked all the political parties to outline their economic vision for the country, their blueprint for prosperity, if you like. The responses were not inspiring. Nothing serious had been prepared because the parties knew the level of voter awareness meant that the economy was not an issue. Bringing in the expatriate community should inject more vigor into the debate.

And yet there is a cynical theory that the much-lamented brain drain is not actually that bad for Lebanon, that it in fact suits our politicians. The talented people, those who may get ideas and demand a better society, leave and make money, which they obediently send home. When it came to voting, they were out of the picture.

Not anymore. When Mr. Mansour does his job, they will have a voice, at last.