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## More women hope to enter politics

43 women were scheduled to participate in upcoming elections before parliament's term was extended



43 women are standing for the parliamentary elections that are supposed to be held in 2013. Even though the elections are likely to be postponed for no less than one-and-a-half years, Lebanese women are displaying more enthusiasm than ever before, as only twelve women stood for elections in 2009.

Still, this new number does not reflect the ambitions of Lebanese women nor does it meet the target of the campaigns launched by some associations. Considering the likelihood of these female candidates actually winning, more must be done.

Lara Saadeh, an activist for the “Women Pioneers” campaign, told NOW that the lack of a formal quota or genuine change in the electoral law has prevented Lebanese women from entering politics. Unfortunately, Saadeh said these same barriers “are still prevalent” today. She added, “A law based on proportionality would have granted women fair chances of entering the realm of politics, and secured access to parliament without the intervention of any party.”

Saadeh, who is also part of MP Sami Gemayel’s team of advisers, criticized the persisting murkiness of the electoral procedure down to the last moment, saying that many more women would have stood for election had the odds of actually holding the elections been apparent.

These 43 women candidates are campaigning against a backdrop of forums, lectures, and meetings all over Lebanon to gain public exposure and experience. Many competent Lebanese women are active in society, Saadeh said, but this does not guarantee they will get anywhere given the gender discrimination found in the field of politics.

Media figure May Chidiac, a Maronite candidate for the Mount Lebanon district of Kesserwan, told NOW that she is in favor of allowing women to progress and reach the highest of positions. She said: “Women no longer have to prove to others their worth as human beings... Lebanese women have actually proven on various levels that they have what it takes to confront the difficulties of life, to struggle, and to take up Lebanon’s defense. I am one of these women and throughout all of these stages, I have never thought about myself in terms of [being] a woman or a man.” Chidiac continued, “However, whether we like it or not, third-world countries still have this patriarchal mentality, whereby a man is the head of the family and the head of the woman as well, although a woman may reach the highest of positions even if a man is present in her life.”

Chidiac said she could understand why some competent women are not standing for election, as politics in Lebanon is a “dirty” and “hereditary” business. Commenting on her electoral platform, Chidiac said that her major cause is that of “Lebanon as a

sovereign and independent country,” free from any foreign pressure or relations that may affect the country’s decisions. Chidiac asserted that she still believes in Lebanon, arguing that her candidacy proves that a woman may get somewhere without a brother, a father, or any other man in her life. She went on to say that she has made it by relying on her wits rather than any aesthetical criteria, before concluding: “I want to be the voice of those who left [Lebanon], of those who have no voice and no forum of their own.”

Nathalie Fadlallah is standing for election for the Maronite seat in the northern city of Tripoli. She acknowledged that she was surprised by the number of female candidates, even though she would have wished there were more of them. Fadlallah added: “Anyway, each woman is worth ten [candidates].” She admitted pride in her candidacy, which has the extra benefit of urging other women to follow Fadlallah's suit.

Commenting on the fact that she is standing for election in Tripoli rather than her native Kosba in the Koura district, Fadlallah said: “I am a native of the North and there is no Maronite seat in Koura, so I am standing for election as a Tripoli representative. Furthermore, my mother is from Minieh and I grew up in Tripoli and everything that harms the region is harmful to me as well.”

Fadlallah said she received several congratulations and support calls from Tripoli, which she viewed as “a jewel in her crown.” While Fadlallah does realize her “tough” mission against a backdrop of the current conflicts, she nonetheless asserts that the locals are “goodhearted folks,” and that the prevailing co-existence among them shall help her express their demands under the slogan: “If you want change, change yourself.”

Pauline Irany, a Maronite candidate for the Mount Lebanon district of Baabda, asserted that women have consolidated their presence in public and private institutions, as well as in syndicates across Lebanon. However, this is as far as they have gone as they failed to take any interest in politics and so far have not taken the process seriously. Irany argued that “Lebanese women should enter the field of politics in order to take part in decision-making. The political atmosphere in the country plays an essential role in preventing women from standing for election, not to mention material reasons as well.”

Irany is a public figure active in the social and environmental fields. Citing various drafts and laws that have yet to be implemented, Irany asserts that she knows where Lebanon's problem lies and how to address it. Irany also seeks to improve Lebanon’s economic conditions, and develop a sustainable environment that creates job opportunities.

Irany emphasized her own independent affiliation, saying “If I manage to achieve a breakthrough [at the expense of a candidate on another list] it would be great.” She also reiterated her support for any candidate who gets elected and seeks to improve and implement projects for the sake of a better Lebanon.

Taken together, more women getting involved in parliamentary life is testament to the progress female activists have made in Lebanon’s civil society. Yet, no sooner had so many women filed for candidacy in the election than Lebanon’s political system dealt them a deathblow by deciding to extend parliament’s term and postponing the elections until 2015.

This article is a translation of the original Arabic