



STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE PRE-ELECTION DELEGATION TO LEBANON

Beirut, Lebanon April 14, 2016

I. INTRODUCTION

This statement is offered by an international delegation organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The delegation visited Lebanon from April 11-14, 2016. The delegation's goals were to:

- Assess the current political and electoral environment in the lead-up to the May municipal council and mayoral elections;
- Assess preparations for the elections and offer recommendations to enhance citizen confidence in the process; and
- Demonstrate international support for Lebanon's democratic process.

The delegation was comprised of Meg Munn, former Member of Parliament and Minister in the United Kingdom; Paul Dewar, former Member of the Canadian Parliament; Rafik Halouani, General Coordinator of the Mourakiboun election observation network from Tunisia; and Leslie Campbell, NDI's Senior Associate and Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

The delegation held meetings in Beirut with candidates and parties participating in the municipal council and mayoral elections from across the political spectrum; officials of the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities (MOIM); domestic observer groups; members of parliament; journalists; and women and youth civic groups. The delegation conducted its activities in accordance with the laws of Lebanon and international standards outlined in the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*.¹

The Institute recognizes that, ultimately, it will be the people of Lebanon who will determine the credibility of their elections and the country's democratic development. The delegation therefore offers this pre-election statement in the spirit of supporting and strengthening democratic institutions and processes in Lebanon.

The delegation wishes to express its appreciation to the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) of the U.S. Department of State, which funded the work of this delegation and supports NDI's democracy assistance programs in Lebanon. The delegation is also grateful to all those who contributed valuable time to share their views freely. Their perspectives have made possible the work of the delegation. NDI stands ready to continue to assist Lebanese efforts to build and sustain democratic practices, institutions, and values.

¹ The Declaration was launched in 2005 at the United Nations. NDI is among more than 40 intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations that have endorsed the Declaration. The full text of the Declaration is available at ndi.org/files/DoP-ENG.pdf.

II. CONTEXT: MAJOR ISSUES AFFECTING THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Municipal council and mayoral elections are scheduled to be held over the course of four Sundays during the month of May. Despite the country's location in a region marred by violence and unrest, as well as significant political challenges at the national level, Lebanon has shown surprising and remarkable political resilience.

Lebanese citizens and political parties appear to see the upcoming elections as an opportunity to usher in new leaders with a mandate to tackle key issues in daily life. In light of serious political setbacks, including a vacancy in the office of the presidency for nearly two years and two postponements of parliamentary elections, citizens are naturally anxious that the upcoming polls will be postponed as well, but a credible, transparent, and peaceful process will help rebuild Lebanese appreciation for elections as an essential part of a dynamic democracy.

A continuing obstacle to meaningful political development and reform in Lebanon is the presence of a major political party that is linked directly to a powerful and active armed group. The delegation found that the atmosphere around local elections in Lebanon was influenced by domestic and regional issues. These include:

Eroding confidence in political institutions

Since the end of Lebanon's civil war, municipal council and mayoral elections have been held on six-year intervals, as Lebanese law mandates. However, the postponement of parliamentary polls in 2013 and 2014, coupled with an inability to elect a president for nearly two years, has eroded confidence in the political process generally, and elections in particular. The result is skepticism on the part of some party and civil society activists about whether or not local elections will be held as promised, and a sense of apathy on the part of citizens arising from their doubts about the efficacy of Lebanon's political structures.

Pressing service delivery challenges

Lebanon's weak infrastructure impacts the delivery of critical basic services, including electricity, potable water, waste management, and public transportation. The most recent wave of protests against government inaction on the waste management crisis during the summer of 2015 has re-focused attention on the potential for decentralization and the role of local governance in service provision.

The role of municipalities in public services varies based on the size and local economy of each jurisdiction. Municipalities are also subject to strict administrative protocols requiring varied levels of central government approval to fund local projects for different projects, limiting municipalities' ability to adequately and consistently provide services for constituents.

Syrian refugees

More than 1 million Syrian refugees are currently residing in Lebanon. The Bekaa Valley, which borders Syria, has been particularly hard-hit by the influx, hosting over 350,000 registered refugees. In several communities, refugees outnumber Lebanese residents. Beirut is home to over 300,000 refugees, while the northern city of Tripoli has more than 250,000 registered, and the southern city of Tyre hosts around 120,000.

UN agencies and international organizations are coordinating with Lebanese authorities in providing humanitarian and other basic services to refugees and the local communities they live amongst. However municipal councils in high concentration areas play a prominent role, as the first point of contact for resource distribution, service delivery, and local security. Lebanon's borders remain intact despite the ongoing conflict on its borders and the

continued flow of refugees. The country's border regions have become more volatile, and municipalities bear the brunt of this increased security concern.

III. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES SPECIFIC TO THE 2016 ELECTIONS

Uncertainty about elections proceeding

Although the Ministry has called for municipal elections within the legally prescribed timeframe, and proceeded with steps to organize the polls, all stakeholders with whom the delegation met noted the widely held doubt that they may not go forward as planned. Most also agreed that the only likely reason for their postponement would be a major security incident, but even in the absence of such an incident, their confidence in the mere occurrence of the elections was low.

The MOIM is the primary body responsible for administering elections, in coordination with other officials at the Ministry of Justice, Information, Education and Finance. The MOIM prepares the voter list (through an annual passive registration process conducted in February), produces national ID cards, trains poll workers, produces and distributes election materials, organizes polling stations, and coordinates security on election day. The MOIM also plans to issue a bulletin to police instructing them to investigate instances of vote-buying and use of public property for campaigning. These preparatory measures were cited as confidence-building measures regarding the ability of the Ministry to organize the preparation and administration of elections.

Participation and Competition

The delegation noted that the public's frustration with the government and political parties has the potential to depress turnout in these elections. Polling by the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) in November 2015 found that 83 percent of Lebanese citizens do not trust the parliament at all to perform its functions. Voter confidence in political parties is similarly low. However, the study identified municipal councils as a credible government institution in Lebanon. Sixty percent of respondents believe municipal elections are important to affect change through new candidacies, and also as an opportunity to increase accountability for local government performance.

Local elections in Lebanon are driven as much – if not more – by family and other local ties as they are by political parties. In many places, party leaders and/or family elders will negotiate a list of candidates beforehand, resulting in an uncontested election. The delegation was encouraged to hear from civil society that there are more candidates running campaigns based on citizens' priority issues. *Beirut Madinati* is an emerging list with an issue-based platform that will contest municipal elections in the capital. The delegation noted that the political parties it met with spoke favorably about this development.

The delegation also focused on opportunities for women and youth to enter the political process through upcoming elections. Citing international conventions including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), civil society organizations are advocating for a gender quota of 30 percent to be included as part of future electoral reform. Parties, for their part, recognize that women's political participation is an issue and are working to varying degrees to involve greater numbers of women on lists and in leadership positions, through formal and informal measures.

Electoral framework

Lebanon's electoral framework includes several unique characteristics, many of which are not in line with international standard practices. The government does not provide standardized, pre-printed ballots, nor does it guarantee secrecy of the vote. The voting age in Lebanon is 21 years, rather than 18, a rule that many domestic and international

organizations have recommended be changed. Lastly, citizens are automatically registered to vote in their families' ancestral home – or for married women, their husband's family's ancestral home – rather than their place of residency. This regulation means that women who wish to run as candidates must run in their husband's ancestral villages, where they do not benefit from the same name recognition or close networks that their male counterparts do. It is possible to change this registration to one's place of residence, but the process is onerous.

There have been several scuttled attempts at electoral reform in Lebanon. A 2008 electoral law put in place following the Doha Agreement was utilized during the parliamentary elections in 2009, but it has yet to be adopted as the country's official electoral framework. Following the 2009 elections, NDI made a series of recommendations, including: instituting pre-printed, standardized ballots; beginning to shift away from a pure confessional system; lowering the voting age to 18 years; and allowing citizens to register in their place of residence rather than ancestral village (or husband's ancestral village).

In late 2015, Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri called for the creation of a parliamentary committee to review proposals for reform to Lebanon's electoral framework. This latest effort for review of the electoral framework has the potential to continue following local elections.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The delegation believes that 2016 elections represent an important opportunity for Lebanese politicians and voters alike to reaffirm their commitment to, and respect for, genuine democratic institutions.

The pre-election assessment delegation offers the following recommendations about areas for improvement in the electoral process. Some of the suggestions could reasonably be undertaken in advance of the elections to instill greater confidence among the voting public and political stakeholders, while other proposals are intended for consideration before future elections.

1. Public Confidence in Elections

Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MOIM). Although the MOIM has called for elections in all regions of the country, it has not yet conducted any voter education campaigns. Strong public signals about the importance of elections are deeply needed to address the low public certainty that they will take place.

Recommendations:

- The MOIM should immediately launch its planned voter information campaign – including national TV spots, billboards, and other avenues.
- The Ministry should make every effort to provide timely and consistent public access to information relating to the elections.
- The MOIM should include in its public communications an emphasis on the importance of the municipal elections to Lebanon's political health.

Campaigns and Candidates. The MOIM has opened the candidacy process for two regions. Despite the fact that candidates had registered in Beirut one week earlier, no public campaigning was visible during the delegation's visit.

Polling shows that addressing unemployment, corruption, and basic services including waste and water management, electricity and public transportation are the highest concerns for Lebanese in all regions of the country. Effective, issue-based campaigning can make a

difference. There is a short time remaining for candidates to reach out proactively to voters, to understand the issues they care most about and to offer realistic and constructive solutions.

Recommendations:

- The organizers of candidate lists should begin the campaigning process in the regions where candidates have been registered, in order to increase public confidence that the elections will go forward as planned.
- Candidate lists should engage the public through electoral appeals based on citizens' priority issues with clear electoral platforms.
- Candidates and parties should adhere to the rule of law and respect MOIM guidelines, specifically provisions that deplore the use of violence and provocative language.
- Political leadership should continue to publicly state their support for elections going forward, and the right of citizens to freely choose their elected officials.

2. Election Administration and Framework

Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MOIM).

Recommendations:

- The MOIM should immediately open the candidacy submission process for remaining regions and open the observer accreditation process.
- In future elections, insofar as the law allows, the MOIM should make every effort to begin election preparations early in order to maximize voter awareness of elections.

Electoral Reform. There is acknowledgement among all stakeholders that reform on technical issues related to residency, voting age, and secrecy of the ballot would strengthen the electoral process. With only three weeks before the first round of elections, electoral reform cannot be addressed for the time-being. However, such reforms could have significant impact on future elections, increasing confidence in the process.

Recommendations:

- The delegation encourages the parliament to take up the issue of electoral reform - which was initiated by Speaker Nabih Berri's creation of a parliamentary committee to review electoral frameworks - and consider drawing on previous recommendations including those made by the Carter Center, [NDI](#)², and the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER) following the 2009 parliamentary elections.

3. Citizen Participation and Oversight

Role of Women in the Election Process. Women's representation in elected office and politics generally is very low. Recent research highlighted that an overwhelming majority of potential voters would view positively women as candidates. In order to translate general support for women's participation into tangible steps forward, both political parties and voters have a role to play.

Recommendations:

² *Final Report on the 2009 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections.* National Democratic Institute, 2010 (<https://www.ndi.org/node/16115>)

- The delegation encourages political parties to translate stated commitment for women's inclusion into action, including fielding lists with women candidates and considering measures to promote women within party leadership positions.
- Women's rights groups should highlight the positive role women have played in government, political parties and as elected office-holders.

Citizen Engagement. Given lack of regular elections in Lebanon's recent past, voter behavior in upcoming elections is difficult to predict. However, NDI has noted increased interest in local government and development, as a potentially motivating factor.

Recommendations:

- The delegation encourages all stakeholders to find ways for citizens to be more involved and exercise their legal rights with regard to citizen participation in governance.
- Accredited citizen observers should exercise their right to monitor the process, offering recommendations to enhance public confidence and participation in future elections.
- Citizens should be encouraged to practice their democratic right to vote, and then track the work of elected officials to ensure accountability.