

National conference discusses key reforms to electoral law

Plan looks to 'protect pluralism, remove politics of elimination'

By Anthony Elghossain

Daily Star staff

Thursday, June 12, 2008



Editor's Note: This article details the initial proceedings and provides an overview of issues discussed in a conference held on electoral law reform in Lebanon. This piece will be followed by an in-depth feature concerned with the entire "Report and Draft Law" of the National Commission on Electoral Law and offering a more detailed glimpse into the discussions that took place at the conference.

BEIRUT: The National Conference on an Electoral Law Tailor-Made for the Nation was held by the National Commission on Electoral Law, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform at the Phoenicia Hotel Wednesday.

Held under the patronage of President Michel Sleiman and featuring several members of the commission, prominent legal minds and political figures, the conference was attended by numerous media correspondents, civil-society-group representatives and diplomatic officials.

Commission member Ziyad Baroud - delivering a statement on behalf of commission chief and former Minister Fouad Butros, who could not attend the conference because of health concerns - began the proceedings by stressing that the commission "sought to propose a [plan] that was not limited to the drawing of districts, but moved toward new horizons of an electoral order that could protect pluralism and remove the [politics of elimination]."

"This plan was carried by the last part of the Doha agreement," Baroud added, alluding to a truce that ended an 18-month political deadlock and, in part, made the question of broader reforms contingent upon parliamentary deliberations.

Martha Ruedas, the resident UNDP representative in Lebanon, noted some of the key reforms proposed by the commission, such as lowering the voting age and granting the Lebanese diaspora the right to vote.

"Lebanon has witnessed four parliamentary elections since 1992 and three different electoral laws. The contentious issue of electoral districting was agreed upon in the recent Doha agreement, [but] key reforms are still awaiting a parliamentary discussion on the draft law submitted by [the committee]," Ruedas said.

Ruedas added that her organization had focused largely on improving the commission's "democratic-governance expertise," meaning the technical or mechanistic aspects needed for a democratic system, and facilitating public awareness of the Butros draft law (as the commission proposal is sometimes referred to).

Ruedas, in what would become a trend at the conference, stressed that the "Doha agreement has given us - has given Lebanon - an opportunity to address the long-pending issue of electoral reform."

Justice Minister Charles Rizk, addressing participants on behalf of Sleiman, traced the "struggle between the need for confessional balance and the need to elect politically based, but confessionally diverse, [parliamentary majority and opposition coalitions]" back to the National Bloc-Constitutional Bloc rift in the 1930s up to the 1975-90 Civil War.

"A political movement bringing together many communities, in this view, should face off with another communally diverse political bloc," Rizk stressed. Within the scope of this vision, Rizk added, the commission balanced "between qada-level or mohafaza-level electoral districting and between majoritarian or proportional voting processes, while proposing fixed-list candidacies" which may allow for "the restoration of a multi-confessional political divide."

Beginning in earnest after Rizk's speech, the conference was divided into three sessions that clustered the issues as follows. The first focused on the proposal to create an independent electoral panel, regulating campaign spending, overseeing media coverage and automating the electoral process.

A second session centered on minority voting rights, instituting women-candidacy quotas, lowering the voting age, instituting voting rights for the diaspora and facilitating the disabled community's right to vote.

The final session dealt with the constituencies and voting system in Lebanese elections, in what most conference participants had earlier described as the vital aspect of the debate that nevertheless has overshadowed the entire reform package proposed by the law.

Baroud, for Butros, said that in any case the goal behind the commission's efforts, irrespective of the sphere of reform being discussed, was "a law made for the nation."