

2022: TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

Why we should bet on the upcoming elections.



2022 ELECTIONS

Lebanon's crippling issues have been catastrophically augmented within the past two years. During which, negative news has found its way into our conversations and daily lives, yet we have failed to delve into serious discussions surrounding tangible solutions. People have come to believe that a sustainable solution is unimaginable. They say Lebanon's issues are far too convoluted for the average citizen to be able to do anything. Still, even though it might seem that all hope is lost and the masses have been stripped of all power of change, the truth cannot be farther away from that. The Lebanese population isn't toothlessly immobile in the outcome of their future. Rather, it is the people that decides the country's own fate, and it all starts with the 2022 elections.

"Monsters exist, but they are far too few in number to be truly dangerous; the most dangerous monsters are ordinary [men and women] ready to believe and obey without asking questions." ~ Primo Levi, The Truce

Regardless of the current geopolitical and local rigidities, Lebanon is still an active democracy and the will of the people still rules. Do not let others have you think that the 'large-nations' of the world decide the outcome of our elections. These big countries simply try to work with the elected official that best aligns with their own ambitions, but the burden of electing these officials rests solely on citizens' shoulders. With the country collapsing, our current class of ruling warlords are still fighting for a piece of an ever-dwindling pie, with little-to-no regard for the general population. Nonetheless, it is not our current generation of politicians that carry the responsibility of the country's demise, but rather us citizens that have been subdued by forces of mass psychosis.

"Just as the technological advances of the modern world have refined and perfected the weapons of physical warfare, so the advance in man's understanding of the manipulation of public opinion have enabled him to refine and perfect the weapons of psychological warfare. ...[and] totalitarian psychological warfare...is an effort to propagandize and hypnotize the world into submission." ~Dr. Joost Meerloo, Rape of the Mind

We have allowed power-hungry men to spread fear into the Lebanese community that has blinded us from their misdeeds and kept them in power. Specifically, it is the fear of other religions that has hypnotized us into voting for our own demise. In spite of this, and despite the dreadful socio-economic situation that we find ourselves in, we have an opportunity in 2022 to reshape our world. By going to the polls and voting in masses in 2022, we would not only be making a statement of intent for the next 4 years, but actually changing the entire Lebanese political landscape for our children and grandchildren. If we choose to turn up to the poll stations in massive numbers and elect representatives that have the entire country's best interests at heart, we could set a merit-based accountability process that pressures all law-makers and enforcers to act within the realms of transparency and justice. This can be achieved by making it clear that in 2022, elections are won through honest work.

To further elaborate, in past elections we had made it clear that we would only vote for politicians that best represent and protect our sect over others. Subsequently, politicians' work has been primarily focused on appearing to fight for their own sects, even when that means that everyone else loses out. The political game is being perceived as a zero-sum game where the only time one sect can appear victorious is if the other loses. This has led to the establishment of a jungle-like political arena of sabotage and manipulation, where progress is of no concern to anyone. Instead it should be clear in 2022 that being elected is earned through authentic reforms. Then, we need not fret to have elected the 'right' person for the job, as the entire system would start rooting out corruption on its own.

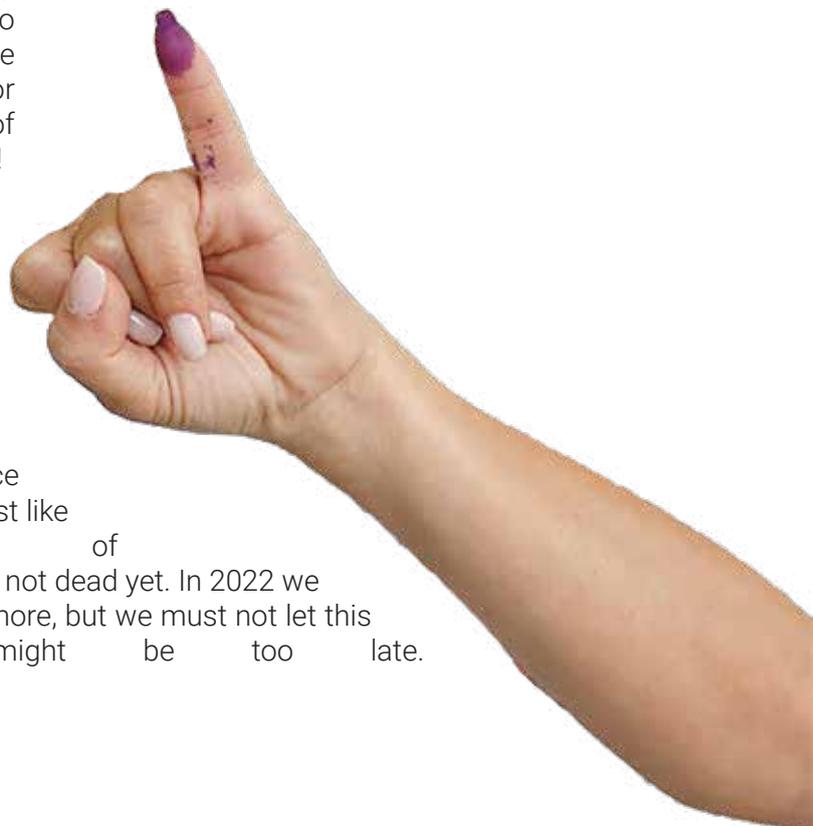
In 2018, voter turnout was 48% of the eligible population¹. Meaning that 3 years ago, more than half of voters didn't bother practicing their democratic rights. While this might seem despairing, the numbers actually tell a story of optimism and hope. The low turnout in 2018 highlights the people's lack of support for the current political parties. After the 2019 revolution and the general social consensus shifting from indifference to political rage, the turnout of these missing 52% - along with the portion of the 48% that want to vote for change as well - means that the 2022 elections hold tremendous potential to completely turn the political tables over. But here's the catch, we NEED to vote. We cannot afford to have a repeat of 2018 with low turnout rates. We have a majestic opportunity to truly change our miserable conditions. We have the opportunity to reach prosperity, free healthcare, and increased employment rates. In 2022 we can make sure our young hopefuls do not have to flee the country in search for a living, we can make sure that no negligent acts, such as the Port of Beirut Explosion, ever happen again. Yet again, I have to reiterate the sheer importance of voting come 2022 as there is no way to undermine its significance. Go tell your parents to vote, your childhood friend and the cousin you only see at Christmas. Start using Instagram to raise awareness and Twitter to voice your optimism. Engage in discussions around the 2022 elections with your household members, acquaintances, or even on Clubhouse.

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon%202018%20Parliamentary%20Elections_Final%20Report%20

In a time where most of the population cannot afford to think of anything other than survival, the 2022 elections will determine the survival of all those living within the Lebanese borders. Nonetheless, make no mistake that politicians will try to abuse the people's desperation to cement their positions.

Politicians will undoubtedly use monetary bribes to secure votes. In fact, all of Al Hizb, Amal, The Lebanese Forces, and The Free Patriotic Movement have already started sending food supplies to their supporters. Money acquired from decades of theft that are only ever used to benefit the population prior to elections. What was in the past achieved through promises of governmental jobs or debt relief is now attained through small portions of foodstuffs. Even our bribery standards have dropped! Lebanese citizens and future voters, if we are to ever truly fight corruption, bad-faith political dealings, payoffs, and deception, we have to start holding elected officials accountable for all their rights and wrongs. Following this trail of thought, the outcome of the upcoming elections will confirm whether there truly was a turning point in the Lebanese mentality and a subsequent renewed hope for the future, or whether our shortsightedness has once again doomed us to a dark pit of deserved suffering. Just like the Cedar in the midst of winter, we might be breathing at a lower rate, but we are not dead yet. In 2022 we have the opportunity to stand under the sunlight once more, but we must not let this chance slip away. For 2026, might be too late.

"In [totalitarianism] shortages of material goods, even of necessities, were not a drawback but a great advantage for the rulers. These shortages were not accidental to the terror, but one of its most powerful instruments. Not only did shortages keep people's minds strictly on bread and sausage, and divert their energies to procuring them so that there was no time or inclination left over for subversion, but the shortages meant that people could be brought to inform, spy and betray each other very cheaply. . ." ~ Theodore Dalrymple, *The Wilder Shores of Marx: Journeys in a Vanishing World*



LEBANESE WOMEN: Second-Class Citizens

What is a women's role?

Some believe that a woman's role should be limited to the private sphere – she is to stay at home in order to serve her husband and children. In this respect, her role does not extend beyond the scope of her kitchen door. But is it even right to define a woman's role? Does anyone have the right to dictate who she is or who she wants to be? Although it may seem otherwise, the problem does not solely lie in defining the role of a woman, as she is present in every single aspect of our lives – she occupies the role of the mother, the wife, the educator, the worker, the nurse... For that, she allegorizes the building block of society as we know it. Regardless of the latter statement, society still has the audacity to define and limit her role to what it deems appropriate. In contrast, do we ever ask what a man's role is?

Her Battles

Some might consider the word "battle" an exaggeration. But the truth is that the Arab woman is a soldier who has remained resilient in the face of all the hardships she faces. In ancient times, the word "citizen" in the law was only used to refer to males. In other words, women were not even recognized in the law, and therefore, nothing ensured their protection. It is only after several battles were courageously fought by feminists that women finally became citizens. Although the latter may seem as enough reason to rejoice, women remain citizens of second class in the Arab world, as the law does not grant them the same rights as men. In addition, society has imposed several restrictions on women on the premise of "protecting them from harm." Society deems it shameful for women to walk alone in the streets, especially at night, and that they should avoid wearing "revealing" clothes so that they would not be labelled as loose women, an occurrence also prevalent in the workplace. "Indecent" clothing is often enough justification for sexual harassment, as society would legitimize the latter by saying "she seduced him with the way she was dressed... she was asking for it." Society has also decided that women are not allowed to oppose their fathers or husbands. Should they do so, these men have the right to abuse them.

Although we live in the twenty first century, achieving equality between men and women is still a long way ahead. While the latter has not yet been achieved in most parts of the world, one cannot overlook the inherent sexism that is particularly characteristic of the Middle East – an area that has almost forgotten what the word "equality" truly entails. Lebanon is no exception. In fact, Lebanese women struggle to achieve said equality on a daily basis, as they continue to be victimized in a society that criticizes their every move. With that said, what are the issues women continue to face? Are they being held hostage in the name of law and religion?



The patriarchal political discourse

The question that always arises is: why are women absent from Lebanese politics?

Part of the answer finds itself in the patriarchal mentality of most politicians. The traditional view of women as inferior and the lack of appreciation of their role in politics and the public sphere have contributed to women's marginalization from politics. In fact, in 2016, Lebanon ranked 136th country in terms of women's participation in politics, which places Lebanon among the lowest in the world. The patriarchal mentality of male politicians mentioned in the beginning of the paragraph is to blame. The latter is apparent when said politicians speak of women in a derogatory way, as they continuously address them with hatred and aggression. It is also obvious when they do not consider them as worthy political allies or opponents. A good example of such behavior is when the leader of the Arab Unitarian Party, Wiam Wahhab, called Vera Yammine, a member of the Political Bureau of the Marada Movement, "ugly" and said that she "has bad breath." Another example is when the Minister of Interior, Mohammed Fahmi, who has always emphasized his bias against women, said that "no woman will be able to successfully become the Minister of Interior because women cannot deal with drug traffickers, murderers, and other criminals." Some are shamelessly offensive to women in their speeches to the public, an example of whom would be MP Walid Al-Baarini when he emphasized before his followers in Akkar that it is the "men" that rule the women, and not the other way around. Other high-profile men, like journalist Marcel Ghanem, have mocked International Women's Day. In 2017, he expressed his discontent with some politicians as they wrote congratulatory messages on that day, and went on to tell women to return to their rightful place in the kitchen. Not to mention the number of female broadcasters and correspondents that are constantly subjected to harassment and insults. Nevertheless, this machoistic behavior does not stop at verbal abuse. Men also made sure to place Lebanese women under their authority in the law.

Personal Status laws

Organizations associated with the United Nations rated the Lebanese constitution as one of the worst in the Arab world. In fact, the law allows sects to freely delineate the number of rights that a woman can have. In Lebanon, there are fifteen sectarian personal status laws for each recognized religious sect. These laws, which are backed by their respective religion, discriminate against women, and consider them unequal to men. Therefore, it is considered unnecessary to grant women rights when it comes to marriage, divorce, and custody.

Disobedience

A woman is considered a recalcitrant wife, or "nashez," under all personal status laws if she does not obey her husband or leaves her marital home without his permission or refuses to live with him without a reason deemed "legitimate" by the courts. In addition, recalcitrant wives are not entitled to receive alimony, and in some sectarian courts, their "disobedience" may take away their right to have custody of their children. The husband can file a lawsuit against his wife because she kept herself away from him, demanding her return in the name of obedience. He may also force her to live with him so that she would not be considered a recalcitrant wife.

Guardianship

The concept of guardianship in personal status laws concerns the upbringing and care of children until they reach adulthood. The right to guardianship under most Lebanese personal status laws is granted to the father.



Divorce

According to a 2005 Human Rights Watch report, women's rights are restricted and limited should they wish to end their marriage. The organization also confirmed that a total of two hundred and forty-three judicial decisions in divorce cases were taken on the basis of systematic discrimination against women. Sunni, Shiite, and Druze laws grant men the absolute right to divorce their wives. As for women, they may obtain this right if it is stipulated in the marriage contract, for example, which is a rare occurrence that is typically rejected by society. Sunni courts often blame women for their failed marriages, even if the latter manage to prove that their husbands were abusive. When it comes to the Christian sects, domestic violence is not a good enough reason to immediately terminate a marriage. A Christian husband can also change his religion and convert to Islam – as polygamy is legal for Sunnis and Shiites – and then remarry without terminating his previous marriage. However, women do not have that option if they wish to remarry. It is worth noting that some women choose to give up their economic rights in order to get out of a bad marriage.

Custody

What usually causes a woman to lose her right to custody? A woman may lose her right to custody if she gets remarried after the termination of her previous marriage or after the death of her husband. She also loses that right if she is a recalcitrant wife, if she behaves "badly," or if she is the reason behind the annulment of the couple's marriage. It is worth noting that many women do not file for divorce due to child custody. A good example would be Mireille, a Maronite woman, who endured domestic violence for years and did not file for divorce because she was waiting for her children to reach the age of custody. Custody laws for the Shiite sect are the most unjust among all the sectarian personal status laws, as they dictate that children are to remain with their mothers until they turn two years old if they are boys, and seven years old if they are girls. One of many examples is when a judge denied a mother from seeing her daughter who had turned seven years old (the legal age), as he decided that the age of the daughter should be calculated according to the Hijri calendar instead of the Gregorian calendar in order to transfer her custody to the father. It is said that the father took advantage of his political connections to influence the judge's decision. If depriving a woman of seeing her children is easy, then it must be no surprise that passing her citizenship to them is legally impossible in Lebanon. The Arab countries that allow female citizens who are married to foreigners to pass their citizenship are: Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Iraq. Therefore, Lebanon is not only lagging behind Western countries, but it is lagging behind Arab countries as well. Whenever a Lebanese woman demands the right to pass her citizenship to her children, she is told that "now is not the right time to focus on this demand, there are more pressing issues." When will it finally be the "right time" for women to claim their basic rights?

Lebanon ranks 65th among 144 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII). Today, it is no longer acceptable to ask why Lebanese women are angry. Similarly, it is no longer appropriate to believe that men are meant to be in politics and women are meant to stay at home, nor is it permissible to use arguments that serve men's interests or to justify any kind of violence, such as crimes of honor and underage marriage. Instead, it is time to put an end to the patriarchy and pass laws that would protect Lebanese women and grant them all the rights that they deserve as citizens!

A CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS:

The Labor Economics of Refugees and Foreign Workers in Lebanon

Economists give little attention to the economics of wartime and migration; they often overlook the fact that refugees and migrant workers are consumers, producers, buyers, sellers, borrowers, lenders and entrepreneurs; in other words, they are a complete additional workforce and not just a humanitarian

First, it is important to note that the impact of refugees is different from that of migrants in terms of timing of arrival and of flow composition. While migrants arrive at a slower pace, obey to market and administrative selection criteria and have the time to integrate into the host society, refugees' arrivals are much more important in numbers, they happen over shorter periods of time and they are generally perceived and treated as being transitory.

An Addiction to Indentured Labor

According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), an estimated 250,000 migrant domestic workers, mainly from African and Southeast Asian countries, work in Lebanon. For decades, Lebanon has relied on them to clean houses, operate gas pumps, and stock supermarket shelves. The largest sector for migrant labor is live-in domestic work, which accounted for 80 percent of migrant labor permits issued last year, according to statistics obtained from the Ministry of Labor. The Kafala system has been shaken by the crisis with new migrant worker arrivals dropped by 75 percent from 2019 to 2020, according to the Ministry of Labor. Foreign workers are now less inclined to gamble on Lebanon with an undeserving salary. The currency crash has exacerbated their already low salaries and forced them to pack their bags and leave. This has greatly changed the scenario inside Lebanese households: what was an absolute necessity, became very much dispensable overnight. It has become a chance for the Lebanese to take these jobs and let go of the long-rooted stigma attached to it. Now is the time to change this horrible mindset and pick up the broom and get to work.

The refugees of boom and bust

There are over 470,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). In addition, 29,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have been forced to flee to Lebanon due to the conflict and depend on UNRWA support. Meanwhile, there are at least 1 million refugees registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and roughly 18,500 refugees from Iraq, Sudan, and other countries. According to a 2019 joint assessment conducted by UNHCR, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the WFP, 73 percent of Syrian refugee households live below the poverty line — less than \$3.84 per day — and 55 percent live in extreme poverty.

While refugees have greatly impacted the social and economic spectrum of Lebanon's status quo, they are certainly not responsible for Lebanon's crisis. International aid has been channeling towards many UN agencies while the Lebanese government and political parties have a long history of securing the spoils of international aid and distributing it to their supporters, while withholding assistance from the poorest and most vulnerable.

However, the main impact can be seen on the costs of lower trade and tourism in Lebanon, which are given high financial importance to the Lebanese economy. The arrival of Syrian refugees yields a positive impact on growth, slightly reinforced by humanitarian aid flows. An increase of aid allocated to investment would significantly enhance the performance in terms of growth. Political obstacles will remain as some fear that the Syrian stay eternally given the history of the country and its multifaceted political equilibria.

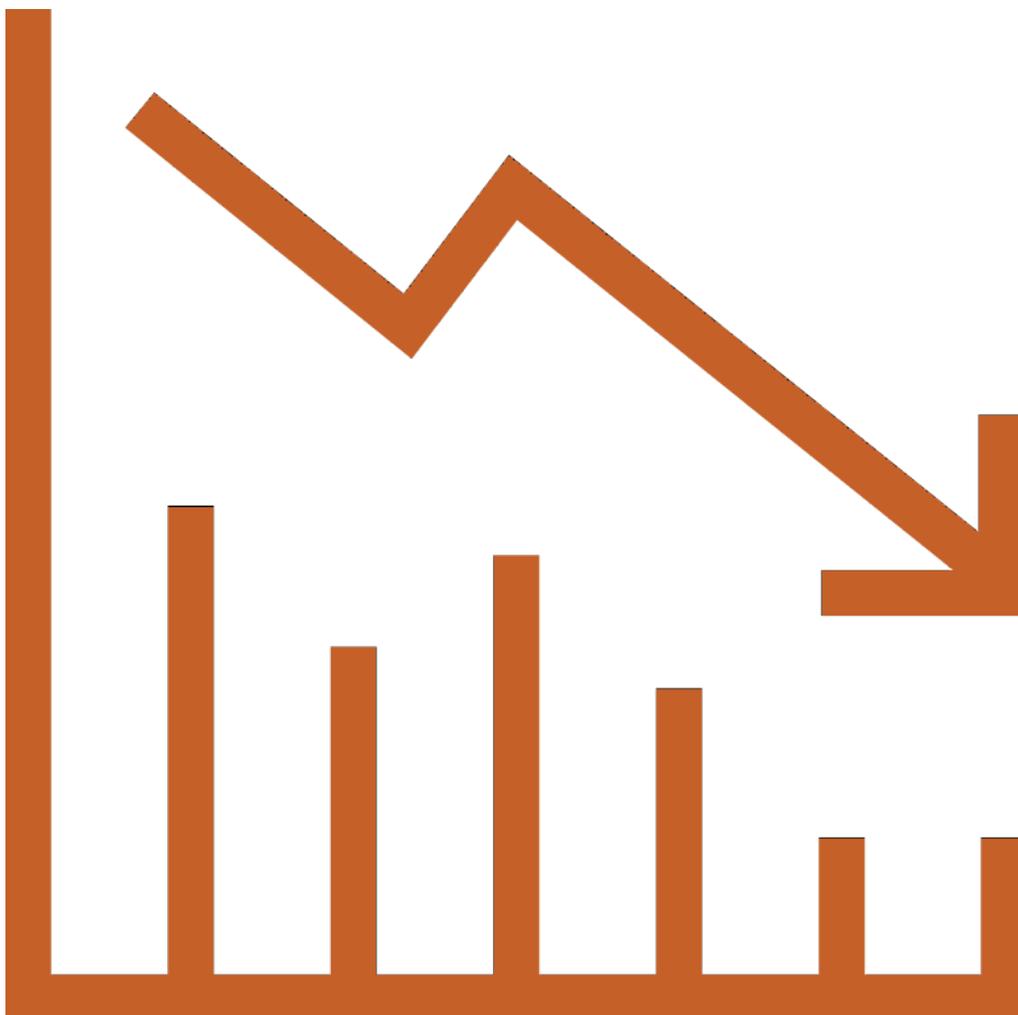
The flow of the refugees has an adverse impact on unemployment and Lebanese labor income, especially for the lowest segments of the Lebanese workforce. This negative effect can be overcome only through investment development. The massive arrival of Syrians has also an impact on structural change in Lebanon. The two channels are the skill composition of the Syrian workforce (mainly unskilled informal workers) and the different consumption patterns of the displaced households. The competition between local workers and refugees is highly dependable on the issue of formality, the extent to which Syrians were already integrated in Lebanese labor markets (particularly workers on the Syrian Lebanese border) and on the interference of foreign assistance. The income of refugees versus the income of poor Lebanese, is a great disadvantage of increased competition between the two, since the latter are unable to benefit from foreign aid.

The only way forward

The main issues that Lebanon's labor economy is facing are that first, the labor market is segmented: labor demand is broken down in a formal and an informal bundle; second, firms distinguish between skills and workers' origin (local, migrant and refugee). Third, wages do not clear labor markets.

To tackle this issue and turn these meltdowns into opportunities, the private sector must intervene. According to the Center of Strategic & International Studies, investing in displaced and vulnerable Lebanese communities would stimulate job growth, create opportunities for refugee and host communities alike, and inject new capital into the Lebanese economy. Second, as the collapse of the Lebanese pound renders many imported foods unaffordable, refugees could bolster Lebanon's domestic food production sector, helping combat food insecurity. Third, the weakening exchange rate will encourage Lebanese exports, and Syrians are well placed to boost the manufacturing sector. The right governance and innovation tools may be a beacon of hope and of opportunity to encourage greater private sector investment that could boost economic growth and job creation during and after Lebanon's dual displacement and economic crises.

In order to have a win-win case in point, refugees and migrants should be well placed to both fuel this growth and benefit from it.



THE LEBANESE PRESIDENCY: A FACE FOR BILLBOARDS OR A FACE OF DUTY?

Democratic systems vary across the globe with parliamentary systems holding the biggest share. In a parliamentary system, the spotlight is mostly occupied by the legislative branch (parliament), even the executives are entrusted by Members of Parliament (MPs) leaving the president (if there is one) with very minimal tasks and a more symbolic role. This is why very few people are familiar with German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier, as opposed to widely popular Chancellor Merkel, and why there isn't a president in the United Kingdom and Canada for instance (the Monarch serves as symbolic figure).

We know Lebanon is a system like no other, where democracy can rightfully be labeled an illusion and sectarian clientelism operates across the board. However, controversy has recently circulated regarding the roles and powers of the President, most prominently in the fight against corruption, the protection of freedoms and so forth. In terms of role, power and duties, is the Lebanese president as useless as he portrays himself to be?

Although difficult to remember given its continuous dismissal, it is important to acknowledge that the Lebanese Constitution lays out the framework through which the system operates, including its most important figures. Promulgated in 1926, the Constitution has been revised on multiple occasions including the amendments of 1989-1990 which moved the major executive powers from the presidency's hands into those of the Council of Ministers, greatly reducing the former's role. However, the president still holds a number of responsibilities and powers, all mentioned in the Constitution. Indeed, in the fourth chapter of its Second Part, the Constitution first gives the President the role of Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces (both the Lebanese Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Army). This alone equips the President with the power to overrule decisions made by both the Minister of Interior and Municipalities (in charge of the Internal Security Forces) and the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces.

As the events of October 17 2019 (and onwards) have demonstrated, the entity which commands the armed forces has significant power and repercussions over citizens, their rights and their physical well-being.

Moreover, the president has formal duties such as negotiating and signing international treaties, attending ministerial meetings whenever he wishes to and also possesses many responsibilities which fall under the theme of 'consultation'. He can introduce urgent matters to the Council of Ministers, like the alarming presence of explosives in the heart of the capital for instance, or ask the latter to reconsider a bill passed by parliament. Additionally, he can summon the parliament to hold an extraordinary session if needed be, like in the case of an economic free-fall (Christ forbid), he can propose new legislations and even address the Chamber of Deputies if he wishes to. Of course, the effectiveness of these technically depend on the president's eagerness to get things done and his concern for national security.



In deep analysis, the Lebanese system of governance is highly centralized around the Chamber of Deputies (parliament), which has the power to pass laws, approve budgets, vote for the President, consult the latter in appointing the Prime Minister and elect half of the Supreme Council members. However, the President has the complete constitutional right to dissolve the parliament through the Council of Ministers (article 55). Alas, this truth is not as much of a breakthrough as we'd hope, for dissolving the Chamber can occur under one of these conditions: if parliament fails to meet on one occasion (the constitution imposes two annual meetings), if it aims to paralyze the Council of Ministers (not approving budgets) or if a majority of MPs insist on revising the Constitution after the ministers refuse the proposed bill. Interestingly, overwhelming corruption does not allow the executive branch to kick MPs out of their precious seats, although the corrupt executives wouldn't have done it anyway. In this light, it is important to mention that before the amendments of 1990, the president had the ability to dissolve parliament with the approval of the ministers without the presence of complicated conditions. Those amendments occurred after the Taïf Accords were issued to end the civil war, only to usher in decades of concealed corruption and disaster; that year was truly one for the books.

For executive decision making, the president can rarely act alone. Indeed, he can only sign two types of decrees alone: the appointment of Prime Minister (the president has to take into account parliamentary consultations regarding that decision) and the resignation of the Council of Ministers. All other decrees have to be co-signed by the Prime Minister and/or concerned Ministers or are previously approved by parliament. For instance, the president has the duty to pass the laws approved by parliament and demand their publication.

So is the president right when he claims he doesn't have the powers to act? As we've explored, he cannot make decisions unilaterally, which in theory is normal to prevent abuse of power. However, he can make a significant impact like ask the Council of Ministers to revoke a law passed by parliament (a demand which cannot be refused), has a say in foreign policy through international treaties and is allowed to suggest important issues to the Ministers; that is if the president wishes to make a difference.

Regarding the (non)fulfillment of presidential duties, the constitution makes it clear that the president shall not be held accountable unless he commits high treason or violates the constitution. Without making serious accusations, both of these conditions currently don't seem as unrealistic or off-base as they should be, and that is no secret. Indeed, the constitution clearly protects the basic rights of citizens, such as the freedoms of expression and assembly, but if these righteous assemblies are rudely interrupted by armed forces who shoot live bullets at protestors, knowing the President is their Commander in Chief, one can make certain conclusions.

Regardless, if the president thinks he can avoid responsibility by not doing anything while our taxes provide him with paychecks, he must forget he cannot be elected for two consecutive terms as per the constitution, he forgets his presidency alone is a breach of the constitution's 49th article which prevents any previous army commander of being eligible for the presidency (a repetitive breach is still a breach), he forgets what the people won't. Michel Aoun is an incapable public servant for one reason only: he knows what is happening, he is aware of the hell we live in (in his words), wakes up every morning and chooses to do nothing. It is not a condition imposed by his role, it's his deliberate conscious decision to watch us crumble and stay put, and that does not look like a good father figure to anyone. As the popular Lebanese saying goes "let it be remembered but never repeated".