Women’s political participation in Lebanon: How family, sect, and the state conspire against women’s participation in the public sphere

By Doreen Khoury

In May 2012, 24 year-old Banin Qataya, a Lebanese Shiite woman who had converted to Christianity, left her parent’s house in a Baalbek village. It was subsequently rumored in her community that she had been abducted by Christian priests. A couple of days later, a Maronite priest, Walid Gharious, believed to have baptized Banin, was kidnapped. Following negotiations between Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck, the head of Hezbollah’s Shura Council, and the Deir al-Ahmar Bishop Semaan Atallah, Gharious was returned on the same day by his kidnappers to Yazbeck and Banin was placed under Yazbeck’s protection until she was returned to her family, who pledged not to force her to convert back to Islam. During this entire incident, Lebanese state representatives remained conspicuously silent, allowing religious leaders to settle the matter between themselves.

Banin’s story is an apt metaphor of the inferior status of Lebanese women in both the public and private spheres. Three patriarchal structures conspired against her constitutional right to practice the faith of her choice and her right to move freely in her country: her family (and her community through extended kinship ties), her sect, and the state (by delegating its responsibility to protect the rights of citizens to religious leaders and the will of the local community). Negotiations between two male religious leaders decided her fate, and the act of ‘returning her home’ reflects where her true position in society is: The domestic sphere. The home is where she ostensibly belongs.

Today, gender discrimination stemming from these three patriarchal structures inhibits women’s full and equal public participation and places them at a vastly inferior starting position in politics. The patriarchal construct of the family in particular extends to the overall Lebanese political culture (defined by Suad Joseph as Political Familism), which has created a political and electoral system inhospitable to women, youth and citizens outside the current political ruling class (which includes both political factions). Continuous political upheaval and legislative inertia has also impeded any progress on gender discrimination reform and political and electoral reform.

The family as the primary social unit

The dire situation of women’s political representation must be first examined within the context of these forms of discrimination (mostly enshrined in various civil and personal status laws).

Banin’s story highlights the primacy of the family unit in Lebanon and with the male at its head. This is reinforced by the various civil and personal status laws in Lebanon. One of the main forms of identification for a Lebanese citizen is the raqm sijl al-3adli or the family registration number, shared by members of the same family through the male line.
It connects family members and extended kin relations under one unit; women are added to their spouse’s registration number when they marry, and revert to their father’s number when they divorce. Thus at this basic level of identification the state views the woman not as much an individual, but as a member of a social unit headed by a male relative. The family and extended kin relationships are an intrinsic part of Lebanese politics.

The Lebanese Constitution reinforces the incongruity between a Lebanese woman’s individual rights and her legal status as an inferior member of a patriarchal social unit, the family. While Article Seven guarantees equality of rights, obligations and duties to all citizens, the constitution delegates all personal status law matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, alimony, etc) to the various religious courts. By stating that Lebanon’s various sects should establish their own religious or personal status courts independent of the state, these court systems are automatically not under the authority of civil Lebanese laws, and are outside the constitution’s provisions protecting the rights of individuals.

The historic weakness of the Lebanese state has meant the primacy of family and kinship ties. In a two-part article entitled “A Legal Guide to being a Lebanese Woman” Maya Mikdashi, after surveying countless Lebanese laws, noted, “There is no abstract mass of Lebanese citizens; there are Lebanese male citizens and Lebanese female citizens.”

Personal status courts identify the male as the head of the household, and often issue patriarchal rulings that discriminate against women. They generally seek to reinforce the family unit (i.e. keeping individual members within them), regardless of the individual interests of its members, especially women. As each religious community has its own personal status laws, women are not even equal in the discrimination against them. Maronite women, for example, find it very difficult to divorce, while Sunni women do not inherit an equal share to their brothers. Divorced women from all sects find it difficult to gain custody of their children.

In recent years, politicians have continued to reinforce the family as the basic unit of society with the male at its head, to treat women as inferior citizens, and to maintain the precedence of religious courts over civil courts in family law. For example, during the 2nd Mikati government (2011-2013) three laws which would have significantly improved women’s lives, were either significantly watered down and rendered ineffective, or rejected outright. The proposed law to Protect Women from Family Violence, presented to the government by women’s rights organisation KAFA was drastically amended by giving priority in jurisdiction to religious courts over civil courts, allowing religious courts to judge whether an act is violent and, should be criminalized. MPs also refused to criminalize marital rape. Traditional male interests colluded to implicitly condone violence against women, and keep women in their place – at home. Religious leaders have also refused to support the introduction of civil marriage in Lebanon, which would free citizens, especially women, from the bias and inequity of personal status courts, as marriage and divorce would be administered by state courts. When Kholoud Sukkarieh
and Nidal Darwich became the first Lebanese couple to have a civil marriage in Lebanon in November 2012, citing the 1936 Decree No. 60 adopted by French High Commissioner during the Mandate period (which grants rights to sects, but also recognizes the rights of individuals), the Grand Mufti of the Republic, Rachid Kabbani, responded by declaring that Muslims who believe in civil marriage should “not be washed, shrouded, prayed on, or buried in Muslim cemeteries”, and that any legal or executive official who supported civil marriage was an apostate. Cowed by this public bullying, Prime Minister Najib Miqati stated that debate on civil marriage should be postponed.

Citizenship is viewed through a patriarchal lens as it is inherited through the father. The father’s heritage supersedes the mother’s – women married to foreign men cannot give the Lebanese nationality to their children or spouses. In January 2013, a ministerial committee rejected a draft law that would make men and women equal under the Nationality Law. It justified its decision by claiming that a large number of Lebanese women were married to Palestinians and thus granting them nationality rights would disturb the sectarian demographic balance, increasing the ratio of Muslims to Christians. Sectarian concerns were used to justify constitutional violations and discrimination against women.

Political Familism

The patriarchal construct of the family in Lebanese is replicated in Lebanese politics. Political familism has been one of the major factors affecting the relationship between state and citizen. It is a two way process. Citizens depend on their families and extended families (i.e. kinship ties) to extract demands and privileges from the state and state actors deploy these ties to mobilize supporters and control sectors of the state. When the state fails to provide protection and resources to its citizens, they turn inwards towards their families, patriarchs and sects.

Almost all political blocs are based on family allegiances and personal loyalty to the leader, the za’im. Political blocs become extended families and most followers accept that the leader’s son will inherit his position. This institutionalizes political familism within the state. Political loyalties and sects tend to pass from generation to generation.

Political familism has historically affected the way women participate in politics, as voters and as candidates. Lebanese women were given the right to vote and stand for a seat in parliament in 1953. As voters, women tended to vote as part of their family, headed by a husband, father or brother. Women did not vote for men outside their kinship ties. Lack of proper secret voting in Lebanese elections makes it difficult for most citizens (let alone women) to vote freely, especially in communities with small numbers of voters.

As with many of their male colleagues, political familism has been the main way that women have entered parliament, often after a male relative has died, thus the oft-repeated adage “Lebanese women enter parliament wearing black.” Lebanon has one of
the lowest rates of women’s political engagement in the region. Since 1953, only 17 women have served in Lebanon’s parliament, and the maximum number of female MPs in one parliamentary term has been six (out of a total of 128 in the 2005 elections). In 2004, the Karameh government appointed two women ministers for the first time. However, the 2011 Mikati government failed to appoint any women ministers.

The most recent female candidate to inherit a parliamentary seat from a male relative is Nayla Tueni, who won her late father, Gebran Tueni’s Greek Orthodox Achrafieh seat, in the 2009 elections. Her record has been disappointing. She failed to use the twin public platforms of a parliamentary seat and a newspaper (she also inherited the influential An-Nahar newspaper from her father and grandfather, Ghassan Tueni) to advocate for any gender equality reforms, despite the fact she endured a sectarian and misogynist campaign against her for marrying outside her sect to a Shiite television host. Other female MPs, though attaining their seats through the political family route, have been more active in trying to promote women’s issues. Strida Geagea, wife of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, has been consistent in her support for the domestic violence bill.

However, these women are the exception and not the rule. Lebanese male politicians, as well as blocking many draft laws aimed at gender equality in personal status laws, have also been consistently hostile to enhanced women’s political participation, often exhibiting a latent misogyny. For example, when the 2011 Mikati government was criticized for failing to include women among its ranks, Free Patriotic Movement leader, Michel Aoun (whose bloc had the most ministers), responded by saying that women lacked experience for public service. He also refused to give women the ‘gift’ of positions of power, urging them to go out and fight for it.

**Political parties and electoral culture**

Despite the fact that many political parties depend heavily on the participation of women as voters, election canvassers and event organizers (to name but a few of the many functions women perform in parties) few if any reach decision-making positions, which remain the exclusive domain of their male colleagues. Women’s equality is generally viewed (by many women as well as men) as subordinate to the party’s political and sectarian priorities, which are frequently treated by the party leadership as existential.

In the past, to boost their role within political parties, female members created women’s committees to focus on their issues and as platforms for their political careers. However, these committees eventually marginalized women instead of encouraging their broader participation within parties. They were limited to discussing women’s issues and their function became more as an NGO arm of the party. The Progressive Socialist Party’s (PSP) Women’s Organisation is a case in point. Despite having an excellent leadership and many highly capable potential politicians, the PSP has yet to nominate any female election candidates.

The electoral system and Lebanon’s overall election culture, is very much an exclusive boy’s club. Its main function has been to reproduce political elites: political families and sectarian parties (the two often being interchangeable – Hezbollah is the most notable
exception). Lebanon has regularly held parliamentary elections every four years since 1943 (except of course during the 15-year civil war 1975-1990 when they were suspended), yet the electoral system and culture has changed little. The ruling political class has been highly adept at putting aside its differences to block any attempt to genuinely reform the electoral system. Elections remained based on sectarian patron-client networks, with vote-buying and aggressive campaigning rampant.

The formation of inter-sectarian political coalitions is very much a za’im affair. Election bartering between male patriarchs over seats and influence do not just exclude women, but youth and all ordinary citizens, whether male or female.

The whole process is particularly inhospitable to women, young people and most ordinary citizens who are not from traditional political families (e.g. the Gemayel family), do not choose to join big sectarian-based political parties (like the Future Movement or the Free Patriotic Movement) or are sufficiently wealthy (like many MPs such as former Prime Minister Mikati or Junblatt ally Chouf MP Nehme Tohme). For independent candidates to join electoral lists headed by a za’im in Lebanon’s multi-seat electoral districts (where victory is based on attaining a simple majority) they must contribute considerable amount of money and/or votes, usually through extended kinship ties and patron-client networks. Anyone outside the close-knit political class is (purposely) excluded.

Another impediment (and source of inequality between women) is Lebanon’s sectarian electoral system. Women not only face a struggle to be selected as candidates, but if they belong to sects that only have a few seats in parliament, their chances are virtually non-existent.

**Blocked electoral reform**

One of the main recommendations (and key reforms advocated for by women’s rights organisations) to boost female representation in parliament has been the women’s quota. The quota can either be in the form of reserved seats in parliament, or (preferably) obliging party or electoral lists to contain a certain percentage of women candidates (usually between 30 to 50 percent). The quota is not enough in itself to enhance women’s representation and requires further electoral reforms and an election system that provides wider and fairer representation. Firstly, in an election system based on proportional representation (as opposed to the current winner takes all simply majority system), the quota would be applied to party or bloc lists either by positively placing women candidates, or alternating the names of male and female candidates on the list. Secondly, regulating campaign spending and elections media would even the playing field, allowing women a better chance to compete fairly and giving them better public exposure.

Here we reach a major stumbling block. Despite the best efforts of civil society campaigns (such as the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform) and many women’s organizations to lobby MPs and political leaders to pass a fair election law, the main political blocs have repeatedly closed ranks in support of the status quo. Political discourse on electoral reform is limited to the electoral system that each party or bloc
thinks will produce the best result for itself. This has usually meant a fair amount of
gerrymandering. Instead of genuine electoral competition, the major political blocs would
much prefer referendum-style elections where they can control the result as much as
possible. Any limits to campaign spending, vote buying and other reforms that would
weaken or fragment their patron-client networks are out of the question.

Lebanon’s ongoing political impasse has also made any bottom-up political reform
impossible. The legislative process is stalled most of the time, because Parliament
Speaker Nabih Berri, who tightly controls his seat of power, tends to convene
parliamentary sessions only if there is political consensus beforehand – a rare
occurrence these days. The stand-off between the March 8 and March 14 blocs (led by
Hezbollah and the Future Movement) has extended to the Syrian Revolution, with both
times actively supporting the regime and opposition, respectively. The political and
sectarian polarization has reduced the debate on electoral reform to which system can
ensure either side’s survival.

Thus enhancing women’s political representation faces several obstacles that today
seem insurmountable; namely a historically weak state, a blocked political and
legislative process, discriminatory personal status laws and entrenched political
familism. Meaningful top-down reform, not just women’s rights but genuine political
reform in the current political system and with the current ruling class has proven to be
very difficult.

Women’s rights campaigns, particularly KAFA’s domestic violence bill and CRTD-A’s
push for a new nationality law, have successfully penetrated public consciousness with
consistent action and both have managed to get their bills onto the cabinet’s agenda
through persistent lobbying of MPs and ministers. The Civil Campaign for Electoral
Reform, which includes Lebanon’s main women’s organisations, has worked
exhaustively over the years to pressure politicians to pass a fair election law and to
lobby public opinion in supporting key electoral reforms.

Lack of awareness and initiative, however, have been Lebanese women’s main enemy.
Political leaders have been able to fend off civil society efforts, largely because there
has been insufficient pressure from their grassroots. The dire situation of women’s
political representation and their inferior human rights vis-a-vis men has not galvanized a
women’s movement outside urban elites to pressure MPs and political leaders in their
local constituencies.

**Are political parties paving the path forward for women?**

Political parties, despite being part of the problem, are women’s best chance to improve
their human rights and attain political office, as the executive and legislative route is, for
the foreseeable future, blocked. Organized and articulate pressure from female
members of the main Lebanese political parties is perhaps the only way at the moment
for the passage of laws freeing women from legal gender discrimination in their private
lives, and for their own enhanced public political representation. Young women
members, especially those who have, or are still, engaged extensively in university
politics and consequently honed their political skills, are perhaps the best situated and
qualified to provide leadership for such an initiative. For example, female party members must hold their leaderships to account for blocking reforms to personal status laws, misogynist comments to the press, and for failing to promote enough women to front-line politics. Most women have so far remained too deferential to the male-dominated party hierarchy, accepting top-down decisions without protest, even when it's against their interest (the quashing of the domestic violence bill, for example). Party loyalty also means forcing the leadership to reform internal structures for the better.

This type of internal party reform requires a sufficient number of female members willing and determined to face the patriarchal structures of their parties and, in many cases, their communities and families. It means women’s political participation becoming a mainstream issue, and not just the domain of civil society groups and women’s committees. And ultimately it requires not just women, but all ordinary party members, to demand internal democracy and transparency within their parties.