

Chapter Nine

YOUTH AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

I. INTRODUCTION

Youth have been active in civil and political life, even before the country's independence in 1943. They participated heavily in the popular upheaval against the French Mandate that gave way to independent Lebanon. They subsequently took an active part, through demonstrations and other means, in the creation of the Lebanese University. They led the national upheaval that resulted from the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and volunteered in the ranks of the unofficial force that fought in the subsequent war. They responded to the call of the Maghreb countries' liberation struggle. They constituted, through the years, the essential part of the volunteers of non-governmental organizations working in humanitarian assistance and in various fields of human development.

Youth played roles of both fighters and healers in the past period of the war, depending in part on when they reached the youth years. Some of those who were young at the beginning of the war were drawn into it, as many other Lebanese, and formed the majority of the militias. Those who were born during the war and reached the youth age towards the end the war, generally took the lead in the effort to heal the wounds and to promote the reintegration of society. Of course, many Lebanese including youth also played this latter role while the war was taking place. Many anti-war demonstrations were led by youth and most of the volunteers in the non-governmental organizations that assisted those affected by the war were in the youth age group.

The present chapter reviews and analyzes different aspects of participation of youth in public life of the country. In as much as youth have been beneficiaries of developmental activities, they have contributed resources and developed their potential to benefit the country. The temporary setbacks that occurred during the long period of war in no way can dampen the enthusiasm, initiative and resourcefulness of the young people of Lebanon. Lebanese youth are indeed powerful agents of change and truly hold the future.

II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The ultimate act of political participation in a democratic society is the participation in the electoral process. In this respect, youth are put at a disadvantage by the fact that the voting age in the country is 21 years. This eliminates the majority of the youth age group from the voting process. In most countries of the world, including practically all the Arab countries where political elections take place, the age of voting is eighteen years, which permits the majority of youth to participate in the electoral process.

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Nevertheless, the participation of youth in the electoral process has been significant. For those of voting age, participation in voting was at par with the rest of the population. For the purpose of this study a special tabulation was made for eligible and actual voters, youth of 21 to 24 years of age and total population, for sixteen towns and localities in the South of Lebanon in the parliamentary elections of 1996. The results showed, first, that the proportion of eligible voters that did participate in the voting was almost the same for youth (55 percent) as for the total eligible voters (56 percent)¹. Second, the percentage of voters in the five main towns and localities in the area was higher than in the villages for both youth and the total population (60 and 57 percent, respectively). Finally, the participation of women was somewhat higher than that of men. In the town of Nabatiyeh, for example, 50 percent of eligible women voted as against 47 percent of eligible men. For the youth of Nabatiyeh, the proportion was the same for men and women (46 percent).

The political participation of youth needs prior preparation, particularly at the university level. Great differences exist in this respect among universities. At the Lebanese University, for example, there is at present only one electoral process a year at the level of each faculty or school. In principle, the elected students form the Students' Union, which elects candidates to the Board of Trustees of the University, but this process remains unfulfilled at present. At the American University of Beirut (AUB), students generally participate in more than one electoral process during the year, including elections to the various Student Societies at the faculty and school levels and general elections for the Student Council at the university level. AUB student elections contain very varied platforms (*see Box*). As a result, independent candidates are generally in the majority of those elected at AUB.

In Their Own Words:

Platforms during the 1997-98 Student Council elections at the American University of Beirut

In addition to the platforms of nationally established political parties, a number of independent groups ran on their own platforms dealing with various subjects of concern to the students, from dormitories to national political issues. Excerpts from a sampling of platforms follows:

“The Environment Candidates”: “Protect the University from the scum of the earth. Here comes the man in green. Vote against the poisoned air you breathe. Vote against the extinction of 4.6 billion years of Mother Nature.... Vote for a greener world.”

“The Commoners List”: “Our program is the following: to defend public freedoms, notably the right of speech; to enhance democracy, to rebuild the University institutions so as to meet the needs of civil society, and to prepare students for building the country's institutions.”

“The Liberals List”: “ Everything we dream of is blurred. They change the game, they set the rules, and have it all their way.... We will start and success will be ours... It all begins at AUB, where our nation's image is molded, where our nation's dreams are born.”

Preparation of university students for political participation is also made through the curriculum². In universities where the curriculum is largely set for all students in a given field of study, courses directly relevant to political participation, such as political development,

¹ It should be noted that the lists of eligible voters are inflated in relation to the actual resident population eligible to vote since many eligible voters are emigrants living abroad and thus not eligible to vote and for other reasons. Consequently, the proportion of resident youth who participated in the voting is higher than indicated by these figures.

² For the new curriculum being introduced at the pre-university level, see Chapter Youth and Education.

human rights, religion and society, history of Lebanon and the like, are offered to the students only as they fall within their specific field of study. In other universities, where elective courses are required for graduation, these courses may be taken by students in pursuing various fields of specialization. Both systems, however, do not offer to youth sufficient academic preparation for political life, considering the special need for it following a long war during which democratic processes and dialogue were virtually suspended. There is need, therefore, to introduce political and civic education at the early stages of university studies for all students, irrespective of their field of specialization.

An important political act taken years ago concerned the *service of the flag*, a one-year period of military service for young men, which was reactivated and enforced after the war. The period of service is for all young men as of 18 years of age and acts as a powerful lever for social integration. Youth from all regions of the country converge to army barracks for three months basic training followed by a nine-month period of service in different regions of the country. Youth are also exposed to different aspects of civic education during their period of service.

III. CONFESSIONALISM AND INTEGRATION

One of the most negative consequences of the war for the social integration of youth lies in the fact that the war has strengthened confessionality in the country and among youth. Many areas in the country that were becoming multi-confessional before the war regressed into areas where a single confession dominates. While geographical multi-confessionality has made some progress since the end of the war, the slow return of the displaced persons remains one of the main reasons for the present regression in comparison with the pre-war period.

In Their Own Words:

Youth summer camps are organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs. These camps are far from being a walk in the country. The youth that participate have to undergo training, and do a lot of hard work for the area that they are in. "Sometimes we work all day in the sun, helping with road work, or cleaning up areas; it is very exhausting, but at the end of the day you get a feeling that it was worth it. The gratitude that the local people show is reward enough," says Hala a twenty-year old volunteer, who has been participating in these camps since she was sixteen. "It is such a gratifying experience that I keep coming back every year, it is also a chance to really get to know new places and people in Lebanon, which you normally would not get a chance to do." The camps also involve the youth of the local community. "We always look forward to the camps in our area" says Ahmad, who is eighteen from Akkar. "Last year, for example, we built a volleyball court in our village, and we had tournaments there all year, when the camps come, they bring the area to life!" Many Lebanese artists participate in the camps, by giving concerts and recitals to campers and area residents in the evenings after the work is done. As one participant put it: "Even though it is 'work' there is also a lot of fun involved, it is not your typical leisurely summer camp, but it is very gratifying to be doing something for others, for your country."

The confessional balance of students in a school or university depends greatly on the location of the education institution. Where the education institution is located in a multi-confessional area, the student body tends to be multi-confessional. The American University of Beirut, which has a single campus, located in a multi-confessional area (and attracts students from all over the country), has a student body that is well balanced confessionally. The same is true of the student body of the campus of the Lebanese American University

(LAU) located in the multi-confessional western part of Beirut. However, the Byblos campus of that same university, located in a predominantly Christian area, has a student body that is predominantly Christian. Aware of this problem, the government has recently decided to establish a unified campus for the Lebanese University where students from every part of the country will come to study in a multi-confessional environment.

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The fact that many young persons tend to live and study in areas and institutions where their confession or religion dominates, is a major handicap for their integration with youth from other confessions. A 1988 survey covering 2,300 university students from all universities in the country shows results of this situation. When asked about the religious background of their best friend, an overwhelming majority from all religions indicated that their best friend was from the same sect or religion (Table 1). When asked about the predominant religion of the members of their social club, the answer was virtually the same: only a minority replied that it was not of the same religion or sect. In these circumstances, the confessional reintegration of youth after the war is bound to be a slow process and will depend largely on the geographic integration of the population at large.

Table 1: “Religious background of your best friend” for a sample of students of universities of Lebanon, 1988
(Percent)

Sect or religion	Same sect or religion	Other sect or religion	Total
Sunni	93.7	6.3	100
Shi’a	93.9	6.1	100
Druze	97.2	2.8	100
Maronite	96.5	3.5	100
Orthodox	65.7	34.3	100
Catholic	91.6	8.4	100
Protestant	60.0	40.0	100
Armenian	81.7	18.3	100

Source: Khashan (1992).

Another survey (Faour, Unpublished) undertaken in 1996 among students of the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese University seems to confirm this confessional bias at the wider political level. The major difference between the two groups of the students was that a much larger proportion of students of AUB (between 46 and 61 percent, depending on religion) chose a historical, a non-political or a non-Lebanese person as their preferred leader, while only 8 to 37 percent made a similar choice among the students of the Lebanese University. For those who chose a current Lebanese political leader, the proportion choosing a leader from the same religion varied between 71 percent (for Sunnis) and 92 percent (for Maronites) among Lebanese University students. Among AUB students, this proportion varied between 74 percent (for Druze students) and 92 percent (for Orthodox students), Table 2.

Table 2: Current Lebanese political leader as “most preferred leader”, proportion of students choosing leader from their own religion, 1996
(Percent of total)

Religion	Maronite	Catholic	Orthodox	Sunni	Shiite	Druze
Lebanese University	92	90	95	71	73	80
American University of Beirut	90	91	92	87	85	74

Source: Faour (1996, Unpublished).

The same survey showed, furthermore, that, among AUB students 62 percent indicated that they are “strongly attached” to their sect and 66 percent indicated that they prefer to marry a person of the same sect within their religion. However, a vast majority (82 percent) indicated that they wished to see Lebanon as a secular state in the sense that appointments to public positions are made on basis of qualifications and not religious affiliation.

This openness to secularism among youth is partially confirmed by surveys on their attitude towards civil marriage. Civil marriage does not exist at present and all civil status matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.) are in the hands of religious courts. But the idea of introducing optional (or elective) civil marriage was raised recently and surveys showed that the younger population of each sect was more in favour of it than the older population. Thus, when AUB students were asked in the Faour survey if they were for civil marriage, 59 percent answered in the positive. A MADMA survey of a nationally representative sample of 2,500 individuals undertaken in 1997 showed that 42 percent of youth were in favour of optional civil marriage and that this proportion declines with age to reach less than 16 percent among those 65 years of age and over. But these proportions differed greatly by sect. For Sunni and Shiite youth the proportion in favour of elective civil marriage was 17 percent and 19 percent, respectively, while for Maronites and Orthodox Christian it reached 75 percent and 77 percent, respectively (MADMA, 1998).

IV. SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

There are approximately four thousand non-governmental organizations registered with the government covering all areas of the country. These deal with all aspects of life, cultural, environmental, sports, scouting, human rights, local development, emergencies and welfare.

Youth volunteers constitute the main corps of field workers in the Red Cross and other emergency response and humanitarian assistance organizations in the country. This has enabled these organizations to respond to emergencies and to engage in social welfare and community service efficiently and free of charge during and after the war, until the present day. Youth have participated heavily in the efforts to return the displaced to their homes and villages. They constitute a significant portion of those active in defending human rights and have supported different initiatives to promote peace and democracy in recent years. They spearhead the activities to promote the environment through specialized organizations and through committees in youth associations. They have also taken the lead in cleaning campaigns, such as those to clean the coastal area and the beaches. They are the soldiers in the fight against drugs and communicable diseases. They are dedicated workers in village communities and in neighbourhood associations in city quarters.

Large numbers of youth are leaders and members of scout movements who are engaged in building team skills and leadership development, and who undertake wide-ranging

community service, spread environmental knowledge, and respond to emergencies and humanitarian needs. Youth in schools and universities have formed an array of clubs operating in different fields, spanning the promotion of civic education and environment to developing political awareness and undertaking sports and cultural activities. They constitute the near totality of athletics and group sports, and are the athletes who represent the country in international events. They are young musicians and artists who develop their talents at the conservatory and in other institutions.

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But youth are not only a resource for activities of non-governmental organizations, they are also the target group of the activities of many of these organizations. For example, the YMCA has a vocational training programme for youth in addition to other education programmes aimed at training young men and women live in a pluralistic society, to become leaders of that society, and to promote peace, human rights, social integration and environmental awareness. Save the Children (USA) has a training programme targeting youth to become community leaders who are to organize local youth and develop local community action. A number of other non-governmental organizations are active in promoting the concept of civil society among youth. The Joseph Moghaizel Foundation and the Lebanese Association for Human Rights organize jointly seminars for youth on the subject of human rights and political participation. The Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace sponsors a programme with similar aims called “citizens of tomorrow”. The Human Rights Movement sponsors education programmes dealing with conflict resolution through non-violent means as well as with rights and responsibilities of citizens. The Moawad Foundation dedicates part of its activities to meetings on representative democracy and political participation. This sample of activities of non-governmental organizations, limited as it is, indicates, nevertheless, the depth and breadth of non-governmental organizations involvement with youth training and their preparation for good citizenship.

In Their Own Words

To get to the village of Yanta, in the western Bekaa, you drive and drive, and then drive some more. In a local artist’s atelier, a group of about thirty young people is gathered to attend a lecture and slide show about Gibran Khalil Gibran. The Youth Club of Yanta organized this activity. “Being so far away from any urban center, means that we have to make an extra effort to bring cultural programs to our village.” Says Amir, the twenty-two year old president of the club. Rabeeh, a seventeen-year old, explains the meaning of Gibran to the club members: “This particular activity is very interesting, because it focuses attention on a Lebanese writer who has become world renowned, Gibran was like us, a country boy, who grew up in a small Lebanese village!” The Youth Club of Yanta is very active in providing its members with a variety of cultural programs. They often bring in speakers, art exhibitions, and films to be shown at their center. “Just because we live far from the city, people tend to think we are not as educated or cultured as they are. A lot of us choose to stay in our village because we love it, this does not mean that we are closed off to the rest of the world” said Doha, a twenty year old student of archaeology at the Lebanese University. “We don’t have a lot of things to do here in Yanta,” says a fifteen-year old girl “it is good that at least we have the youth club, it gives us a chance to get together, and spend our time in a useful way.” Added a young lady: “These kinds of activities let us go places in our minds, if we can’t go there physically.”

Government activities for civic preparation and confessional integration of youth have been more limited but significant nevertheless. As indicated in the Chapter Youth and Education, a new curriculum is being introduced at the pre-university level, which includes courses aimed at promoting civic education and a common outlook. As was just noted, the Lebanese University will soon have a unified campus that will constitute a meeting place for young people from all confessions and all parts of the country. The youth that participated in the war through various militias have largely been incorporated in the armed forces of the country and, by all indications and testimony, have been rehabilitated to society. But the war of liberation from the Israeli occupation of parts of the South and Western Bekaa continues and many young people are directly involved in the fighting. The complete rehabilitation of Lebanese youth for life under conditions of peace will need to await the end of this problem.

V. CONCLUSION

The youth have traditionally had a high degree of political involvement and social participation. After the war, they have participated in many activities, through organizations of the civil society, including youth organizations aimed at promoting various aspects of human development – environment, human rights, emergency response, return of the displaced and human welfare. Encouraging youth to participate even more fully in the political and social life of the country should constitute a priority to government and civil society, particularly in view of the positive attitude prevailing among youth for such participation. Mechanisms for participation of youth at different levels are to be created and an integrated set of youth development policies is to be formulated underpinned by allocation of adequate resources. Individual and group initiatives of youth worthy of support must be recognized as such and highly talented youth in different fields must be given opportunities to fully develop their potential.

Changing the minimum voting age from the present 21 years to 18 years is a most urgent action required for the wider participation of youth in the electoral process. This would be in line with a wide practice regionally and internationally. Preparing youth for political and social participation is another priority area for government and the civil society. For those in universities, a democratic process of elections, representation and involvement in decision-making may be a prerequisite in this regard. Education at all levels including subjects relevant for proper political understanding of citizens' rights and obligations, which should be introduced. At the pre-university level, the new curriculum being introduced by the government is a step in the right direction that should be followed by a similar effort in relation to university education. Civil society should also increase its efforts in this regard, through seminars, youth camps and other programmes that bring youth together from different regions of the country.

The confessional integration of youth is still problematic and will remain so as long as there is insufficient integration at the geographic level and consequently in the schools. In multi-confessional areas, schools are multi-confessional helping to re-establish interconfessional harmony. The return of the displaced will go a long way in strengthening this process.