

Will the debate over 'mega centers' delay Lebanon's parliamentary elections?

Author:

Wed, 2022-03-09 21:04

BEIRUT: The Lebanese government is expected to make a decision on Thursday on whether to set up so-called mega centers to make it easier for people to vote in the country's upcoming parliamentary elections.

The aim of the facilities, which are favored by President Michel Aoun, is to allow voters to cast their ballots outside their area of registration, meaning they would not have to return to their hometowns to do so.

However, it has been suggested that if the centers are created it could lead to the elections, currently scheduled for May 15, being delayed.

After a ministerial committee completed a report into the issue, the Cabinet must now decide how to proceed based on its findings. If it approves the idea, a draft law would have to be submitted to parliament to allow the centers to be created.

While Aoun's camp said that "no legal measures were necessary to adopt the mega centers. It is very easy if the political intent is there," the opposition said that "the issue requires legal amendments and will result in a very high financial cost."

In the committee's report, Tourism Minister Walid Nassar said: "The cost of establishing eight mega centers ... does not exceed \$2 million and they can be completed in no more than three weeks."

But Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said the technical requirements of setting up the facilities would lead to disruption.

"The ministerial committee is against postponing the elections and insists on holding them on the designated date without any delay," he said.

The disruption would be caused by the need for the centers to have the "necessary principles and requirements in order to have a sound election," he said.

"It is not a tent that can be set up in neighborhoods with a ballot box on top of a table. It is way more complicated.

"Mega centers without electronic connection, fiber optics and a central server that provides the necessary linkage are not actual mega centers, unless they want them to be like tents."

He added: "The company that will be in charge of this project will need up to

three months to complete the task and link the main electoral centers to the mother server. Moreover, what applies to the Lebanese voters living outside the country should apply to voters residing in the country.”

Political observers said that the insistence of Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement to establish mega centers aimed to “impose the extension of the current parliament’s mandate so that this same parliament elects the next president in the framework of a certain settlement.”

The presidential elections are set to take place in October.

But the FPM said its call for the establishment of mega centers was made in response to the change in circumstances since the 2018 elections.

“This is due to the significant economic collapse the country has been suffering from since 2019 and because it would be difficult for voters to go to their villages due to the high cost of transportation,” it said.

The huge spike in the price of gasoline – to close to 500,000 Lebanese pounds (\$330) a gallon – meant that the centers would save the Lebanese people billions of lira, the FPM said.

“In addition, the mega centers help free the voters of numerous restrictions, raise the participation rate and promote the legitimacy of the electoral process,” it said.

The FPM is concerned that the high cost of traveling home to vote will deter many people from doing so. But political observers said that other political parties, especially Hezbollah and Amal Movement, are opposed to the idea of the mega centers as it could dilute the influence they hold in small villages and towns.

Other observers said that the FPM might be deliberately seeking to delay the polls to give it a greater chance of winning more parliamentary seats in certain regions.

“The aim could be even bigger than that. It could be seeking to create a parliamentary vacuum in order to disrupt the next presidential elections,” one observer said. “That way, Aoun remains the president to run the affairs of the state.”

MP Mohammad Hajjar, from the Future Parliamentary Bloc that represents the Sunni majority in parliament, told Arab News that if parliament decided to extend its mandate, the bloc’s MPs would resign.

“This decision has been taken and is irreversible. As for the postponement of the elections, that is a different story. We insist on holding the parliamentary elections on time. However, if an unexpected event occurs, that is a different matter.”



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[Arab League summit set for Algeria in November](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2022-03-09 17:33

CAIRO: The Arab League will hold its first annual summit for three years in November in Algeria, the bloc said on Wednesday, after the pandemic forced the meetings' suspension.

The two-day summit is usually held in March and was originally slated for later this month, but will now be held in Algiers starting on November 1, the organization's chief Ahmed Aboul Gheit said.

The last summit was held in Tunis in March 2019.

A meeting of Arab League foreign ministers in Cairo on Wednesday discussed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, citing "the need to reach a diplomatic solution" in a final statement.

But Aboul Gheit warned that the war "must not let us forget the Arab crises that are not over."

Conflict and crises persist in several Arab countries.

Yemen has been mired in war since 2014. The UN has estimated the conflict killed 377,000 people by the end of 2021, both directly and indirectly through hunger and disease, while millions have been displaced.

Sudan is reeling after a military coup in October that derailed a fragile transition to civilian rule, following the 2019 toppling of longtime strongman Omar Al-Bashir.

Libya now finds itself with two rival prime ministers vying for power, in a standoff that threatens a return to violence after a year and a half of relative stability.

Arab countries are also divided over the issue of a return of Syria to the Arab League, following its suspension in 2011 after the brutal repression of peaceful protests spiralled into a complex civil war.

This year's summit is important for Algeria, which has been seeking to expand its political sphere of influence, against the backdrop of heightened tensions with Morocco.



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Italian envoy lauds 'outstanding' UAE commitment to reducing emissions

Wed, 2022-03-09 20:36

ROME: Italy's ambassador in Abu Dhabi has praised the UAE for its "outstanding" commitment in the reduction of CO2 emissions.

Speaking at a debate on "the global need to save energy" organized by the Italian Trade Commission at the Italian pavilion of Expo 2020 Dubai, Nicola Lener said "huge investments are planned" in the UAE to reduce polluting emissions and increase production of clean energy.

This "positive and consolidated attitude" opens the way to "many opportunities for greater cooperation with international investors and partners, including Italian firms, which can provide state-of-the-art and innovative technologies," he added.

Lener explained to the audience the UAE's goal of achieving 50 percent clean energy supply and reducing its carbon footprint by 70 percent by 2050.

The audience included Emirati and Italian players in the field of environmental defense and clean energy production, such as Enel.

"We aim to present all the Italian innovations applied to the energy sector," said Amedeo Scarpa, director of the commission in Dubai.



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UAE Barakah nuclear plant to reduce 22.5m tons of annual carbon emissions

[Houthis accused of abusing women with moral policing](#)

Wed, 2022-03-09 20:09

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's information minister on Wednesday accused the Iran-backed Houthis of human rights abuses against women in areas under their control, described by one victim as "a hell," in the wake of a new report prepared by a prominent Yemeni rights organization exposing grave violations committed by the militias against females.

Muammar Al-Eryani said the Houthis have abducted and imprisoned women, raided their homes, restricted movement and expression, raped many of them inside their detention centers, and abducted their husbands.

Commemorating International Women's Day, Al-Eryani called on international rights groups and women advocacy organizations to name and shame the Houthis, and to push for the criminal prosecution of their leaders.

"The war triggered by the Houthi coup militia left unspeakable human tragedies for women. Thousands of them lost their husbands on battlefronts, thousands of women's relatives were abducted & forcibly disappeared, millions of women were displaced with their children in camps and abroad," Al-Eryani tweeted.

Mwatana, a local human rights organization, has issued a new report that highlights the violations committed by the Houthis against Yemeni women in Sanaa and other areas under their control.

It accused the Houthis of intensifying its crackdown on women by banning them from traveling without a male relative, expelling them from work, prohibiting them from integrating with men, and preventing them from obtaining contraception.

"Ansar Allah's dangerous and disgraceful efforts to restrict women's rights undermines the gains Yemeni women worked for decades to (achieve), and undermines their presence in public space," said Radhya Al-Mutawakel, chairperson of Mwatana for Human Rights, using the Houthi movement's official name.

"Ansar Allah should stop this ideological targeting of women, Yemeni women don't need guards of virtue; they need their rights respected, and accountability for all those who violate them."

Based on the accounts of many victims of the Houthi crackdown, the organization said that members of the militia insulted a group of women and briefly detained them for moving between cities without a male relative companion, known as a mahram.

"They referred to us as a 'prostitution cell.' There were seven armed men who verbally harassed us, put us under terrible psychological pressure for six hours, took our passports, prevented us from getting out of the car, and searched our phones, computers and bags. It was a moment of hell," a woman, who preferred to remain anonymous, told the organization. She said the Houthis released them only after they had signed a written pledge that she and her friends would not travel without a mahram again.

The Houthis also raided several restaurants, cafes and parks in Sanaa and other areas under their control to impose gender segregation and detain female workers.

The organization said that in January last year 30 women lost their jobs in Sanaa after the Houthis raided their restaurant, abducted the owner and asked him to dismiss female workers who were allegedly "wearing make-up and talking to men."

The organization said the Houthis denied women access to reproductive health services, including contraceptive pills, without the permission of their

husbands; and restricted the distribution of condoms on religious grounds, which forced many women into seeking abortions.

“I came to the health center to pick up my contraceptive pills. They refused to give them to me and asked me to bring my husband so he could give his approval. This is a significant burden,” a 37-year-old housewife from Hajjah province told the organization.

As part of the continuing morality campaigns, the Houthis have banned singing at weddings and public places, abducted women who wear tight clothes in public places and harassed singers, artists and actresses.

The Houthis are still holding Entesar Al-Hammadi, a Yemeni actress, who was abducted from a street in Sanaa early last year, for allegedly violating Islamic dress codes.



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Yemeni women's living conditions difficult under Houthis Poor economy and war forcing Yemeni women to break with tradition and become breadwinners

Lebanon's president honors military women

Author:

Tue, 2022-03-08 23:40

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun celebrated female army soldiers and officers on International Women's Day as a delegation visited him at the Baabda Palace.

"I can see the fruits of the efforts made to integrate women into this military institution; something that was impossible in the past," Aoun said.

He added: "The number of women in the army is steadily increasing in a patriarchal society that was not ready to believe women can succeed in a field previously reserved for men."

Aoun called for further efforts to make sure women enjoy the same rights as men. "Today, women practice various functions in society; they are doctors, scientists, judges and so on. But they are yet to attain their full rights in one field: Politics, and having equal representation in Parliament. We strive to achieve this."

The commander of the Presidential Guard Brigade, Brig. Gen. Bassam Al-Helou, who accompanied the delegation, said: "These female soldiers are the elite members of the Lebanese Army, and they work in all departments of the Presidential Guard Brigade and the Presidency's Directorate-General."

Lebanon's sixth official periodic report was presented before the UNHCR follow-up committee in February to discuss the extent to which the country has implemented the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

It revealed notable progress in integrating women into institutions, especially in the military. A Gender Department was also established for the first time in the army.

The report read: "A remarkable increase in women's enrolment in army ranks was recorded over the past year. In 2022, 51 female officers out of 110 cadets will graduate from the Military College, and their number will increase to 55 out of 108 cadets in 2023, a number of whom will join the naval and air forces."

Minister of State for Administrative Reform Najla Riachi said on Tuesday: "Despite the positive breakthroughs women have achieved in assuming leadership positions in the political arena, progress in this field is still limited. Serious consideration must be given to the reasons that still, unfortunately, impede the achievement of complete equality between women and

men.”

Riachi added: “We must overcome such obstacles, in compliance with the preamble of the constitution, which stipulates that all citizens are equal in rights and duties without discrimination. This is crucial if we are to meet the fifth goal of the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, which Lebanon pledged to implement.”

FASTFACT

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International Women’s Day in Lebanon was overshadowed by growing crises over food security, and medicine and fuel shortages. Still, Lebanese officials, including Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi and Environment Minister Nasser Yassin celebrated Lebanese women on Tuesday.

National Commission for Lebanese Women head Claudine Aoun said: “With the support of civil society institutions and international organizations, the commission is following up on the government’s implementation of a national action plan we had drawn up, despite the difficulties it faces at the financial, health and supply levels.”

Meanwhile, the National Federation of Employees’ and Workers’ Unions was explicit in pinpointing the obstacles still facing Lebanese women in light of the economic crisis.

It warned that Lebanese women are subjected to the “worst forms of exploitation” as a result of the crisis and financial collapse, and that the state and ministries were failing to provide women with any support or social security.

“Today, some Lebanese women work more and get paid less, while others have been pushed into unemployment.”



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