

Workshop argues for need to lower country's voting age from 21 to 18

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BEIRUT: While a Lebanese citizen can get a driving license, join the army and carry an assault rifle at 18, he or she must be 21 years old to vote. The most cited reason given to date for not lowering the voting age is that it would threaten the sectarian balance in the country, a claim challenged by many.

The need to lower the voting age in Lebanon to allow young people to participate in decision-making was the theme of the first in a series of nine workshops on a proposed new electoral law drafted by the National Election Commission appointed by the government.

The workshop, organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), was held on Wednesday at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Hamra and included representatives of youth organizations, NGOs and other civil society actors.

Addressing the workshop, Hassan Krayem, a policy specialist with UNDP, suggested that one possible reason legislators seem unwilling to lower the voting age is because those between the ages of 18 and 21 tend to be rebellious and would be difficult to control by political parties come election day.

Nawwaf Salam, the Lebanese representative at the UN, said lowering the voting age has been a demand in Lebanon for at least 30 years. The last serious attempt to lower the voting age floundered five years ago when the 2000 election law ignored the issue, he added.

Salam said it was high time the voting age was lowered, and noted that the United Kingdom was considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. When the voting age was first set at 21 in Lebanon access to information was very limited compared to the present day, as the Internet now invades almost every home, he added.

"Today a 12-year-old is more aware of what is going on around him than a 21-year-old was 50 or 60 years ago," he said. "I was born in an age before television ... Today my son is not happy with 50 channels; he wants 150."

In addition to lowering the voting age, the age at which a citizen may run for office, which is also currently 21, needs to be lowered, he added.

"It may be difficult to achieve that right now, but it must be put on the table nevertheless," he said.

Jamil Mouawad, the LCPS program manager and coordinator of the Youth Coalition for Electoral Reform (CHAEN), said the main challenge was not only to convince legislators of the need to raise the voting age, but also to convince youths of this need as well.

"We were surprised to find many youth were not in favor of lowering the voting age ... They feel political participation is only the freedom to express themselves, whereas it is also [their right] to share in decision-making, which is either taking part in the political process or voting for your representatives," Mouawad said.

Youths in Lebanon are being marginalized and used negatively, he added, referring to their participation in demonstrations, distributing political pamphlets and carrying pictures of their candidates.

"Then come Sunday they can't vote," he said.

"When we give them the right to vote we give them an incentive to participate," he added.

CHAEN is presently focusing on five areas of electoral reform: introducing a quota for women in Parliament to increase their participation in political life; ensuring Lebanese abroad have the right to vote; establishing an independent committee for proctoring elections; enforcing regulations on media coverage, campaign advertising and spending; and lowering the voting age to 18.