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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by The Next Century Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Upholding the 1989 Taif Agreement: Lebanon and the Need to Abandon Its Sectarian System

As electrical grids disintegrate, fuel shortages continue, and hospitals sound alarms, it has become impossible to ignore the constantly deepening financial crisis in Lebanon. With one of the widest wealth inequality gaps in the world and the greater part of the population living under the poverty line, it has unsurprisingly put Lebanon on the list of the top ten worst crises in the world. The Next Century Foundation (NCF) recognises the demonstrable disadvantages of the sectarian political system in Lebanon and calls for a change in this political framework which has arguably laid the foundation for a now corrupted economy.

The sectarian system was established with the aim of encouraging diversity and religious integration, with a Sunni Muslim prime minister, Shi'a Muslim as speaker of the house, and Maronite Christian as president. However, sectarianism has instead incited hatred and deepened divisions between the existing religious sects. More critically, the appointed leaders are typically known to be part of the political and economic elite. Therefore, they do not invariably represent the interests of the general Lebanese population and instead continue to perpetuate sectarian politics at the expense of the country's social cohesion and sustainable development.

Taif Agreement

The Taif agreement was negotiated in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia in September of 1989 and ended fifteen years of civil war in Lebanon. The principle political reform set forward in the agreement was to modify the National Pact (1943) by transferring power away from the Maronite Christians. The agreement ensures that the Sunni prime minister is answerable to Lebanon's parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, and has stronger powers than those of the appointed Maronite Christian president. This agreement greatly diminished the presidential powers in Lebanon and benefited the Council of Ministers. The Chamber of Deputies was also increased to 128 members equally shared between the Christians and Muslims, instead of being elected by universal suffrage which would most likely yield a Muslim parliamentary majority. The cabinet is also allocated equally between Christian and Muslim members. Most importantly, one of the main priorities of the Taif Agreement was to abolish political sectarianism, however, the agreement stated this as an objective without a stipulated timeframe — a flaw then, and an active threat to democracy now.

Recent Developments

The NCF recognises and commends Recommendation 159 in the Recommendations of the 2015 Universal Periodic Review of the Lebanese Republic, which recommends “the need to safeguard the democratic nature of Lebanon”. This is important in light of Lebanon's gradual and observable democratic backsliding. Accordingly, the Next Century Foundation would like to express its expectation and trust that the upcoming election due to be held in 2022 will go forward as planned.

In the span of less than a year, two prime ministers, Hassan Diab and Saad Hariri, have resigned from their appointed positions. Most recently, Najib Mikati has been named as prime minister-designate. The NCF is disheartened by the repetitive renunciation of responsibility from political actors due to the instability it brings for the country, especially in its time of need. However, we recognise this cannot be viewed as an individual problem and instead a systematic issue within the country's political system. The resignation of Saad Hariri has apparently been attributed to frustrations with conflicting interests between the prime minister and president, both of whom must approve the cabinet appointments proposed. This is yet another supporting example of how the sectarian system is driving Lebanon into a deadlock, with the power-sharing system resulting in executive decisions being inefficiently carried out, if at all.

Lebanon is now using a proportional list voting system, by which there are electoral districts made smaller by the subdivision of districts into sub-districts. The electoral map in Lebanon

is currently divided into 15 electoral districts and the available seats are allocated amongst the sub-districts. Each religious sect (Christian, Sunni, Shi'a) has a designated number of seats in parliament. Regardless of their religious following, all candidates in a particular district must receive the plurality of the vote, encompassing followers from all denominations. In theory, this electoral system has been designed with the goal of limiting inter-sectarian competition and instead encouraging cross-confessional cooperation. However, in practice, this system has laid the foundation for possible gerrymandering. For example, in some instances, constituency boundaries have been set to allow Shi'a Muslims to be elected by districts in which there are Shi'a majority populations. There are also sub-districts with a Muslim majority which appoint Christian members to parliament.

However, the NCF's biggest concern lies with the constraints placed by the United States of America on Lebanon's banks. These constraints have been put in place with the intention of preventing the Lebanese banks from facilitating the flow of money to and from political party, Hezbollah. Despite its declared intentions, these measures have instead taken a toll on the country and Lebanese peoples who are now struggling to live their daily lives with bank closures and record levels of inflation. The international community must facilitate a smoother transition to a restorative economic system in Lebanon instead of punishing innocent civilians. The NCF strongly urges France, a country with a historic responsibility and stake in Lebanon, to take a larger role in liaising with Lebanon to aid the resolution of its political and economic crises.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The electoral system should be amended to allow for larger districts without subdivisions, reducing voting inequalities and the role of confessions in the electoral process. We further recommend the removal of the requirement by which candidates must be associated with an officially recognised religious sect in Lebanon. Citizens should also have the option to register to vote at their place of residence, instead of following the traditional voting system only allowing citizens to vote in the place of their family's origin, a system which reflects unrepresentative demographics of Lebanon. Furthermore, we urge for Lebanon to lower the voting age from 21 years to 18 years as a way of empowering the young Lebanese, many of whom have been active in recent protests and demonstrations, to take a larger role in political activity and potentially increase voter turnout.

The NCF calls upon Lebanon to implement the bicameral system of governance envisioned in the Taif agreement in order to address the confessional deadlock that often paralyzes governance in Lebanon. The bicameral legislature would introduce a non-confessional lower house of parliament and an upper house representing the various confessional groups in the country. We are aware that this is a major restructuring and would take time to implement, however there has to be a fundamental change in the system for there to be any hope for Lebanon going forward.

The Next Century Foundation encourages the withdrawal of banking restrictions placed on Lebanon by the United States of America, due to its disproportionate effect on the innocent Lebanese citizens now unable to access basic staples such as food and medicine. This is now more than an economic crisis; it is a human rights crisis. A country in which civilians are guilty of nothing but their nationality, are punished and left under poverty in a country with a broken political system and corrupted economy.

We view with appreciation the recent efforts by the French Republic in raising at least \$350 million in funds to contribute towards emergency aid in Lebanon, by engaging international and regional support from actors such as the USA, Egypt, and the International Monetary Fund. We further invite France, a country with historic responsibility and ties with Lebanon, to take a greater role in urging reform in Lebanon. We believe the USA and France should work together on lifting de-facto sanctions on banks and instead placing them on the relevant corrupted political actors and groups. On the macro-level, we strongly encourage the international community to support the relevant reforms, contribute in aid, and most importantly, stand in solidarity with Lebanon during this time of need.

Finally, we are most encouraged by the initiatives of young people and the new generation with their energy and recognition of the fundamental issues in Lebanon. A new system may only be put in place when pressure from these new voices continue to overpower the current system and an opposition begins to form.
