



# **“Freedoms and Elections”**

## Roundtable Report



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On December 7th, 2021, SEEDS held a Roundtable Event titled “Freedoms and Elections” with the support of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS).

The event explored the importance of free elections in a democratic society and discussed, with expert guests, tangible recommendations that can ensure that freedoms of participation, equal representation, and access to information are all safeguarded in Lebanon’s 2022 Parliamentary Elections.

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# **“Freedoms and Elections”**

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### **Expert guests included:**

**Hussein Alshareef** - Journalist and Researcher at Maharat

**Nizar Aouad** - Gender Advisor at Oxfam

**Philipp Bremer** - Director of KAS' Rule of Law Program Middle East and North Africa

**Cynthia Chidiac** - Legal Advisor with the UN Commission on the Status of Women and with the National Commission for Lebanese Women

**Verena El Amil** - Political Activist

**Laury Haytatayan** - Oil and Gas Expert in the Middle East and North Africa and General Coordinator of the Taqaddom Party

**Alia Ibrahim** - Co-Founder and CEO of Daraj Media

**Ali Slim** - Executive Director at LADE

**Tarek Khalil** - Member of “Sawti” Initiative

**Diana Menhem** - Executive Director at Kulluna Irada

**Ali Mourad** - Legal Advisor with Kulluna Irada

**Layal Sakr** - Executive Director at SEEDS

**Myriam Sfeir** - Director of the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University

**Jad Shahrour** - Communications Officer at Samir Kassir Foundation

## Introduction

The event was kicked off with welcoming words by SEEDS' Executive Director Layal Sakr who made the case that freedoms and elections are among the most important pillars of democracy, and she stressed on the importance of protecting freedoms and holding free and fair elections on time.

Then, Philipp Bremer, the Director of KAS' Rule of Law Program in the Middle East and North Africa, touched upon the doubts of many with regards to the 2022 Elections: Will it happen or not? However, as Mr. Bremer said, it is of utmost importance not to let doubts spread and sink in. To the contrary, we should never lose hope, we should never stop fighting for elections and for the rule of law in this country. We should never lose sight of the fact that elections are supposed to be "self-evident" and not a matter of chance. And this roundtable event is part of that fight.

## Panel 1: Best Practices for the Democratization of Elections

This first panel underscored the necessity of practicing the right to vote and its importance in increasing the potential for change. This right is guaranteed by Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Lebanon is a signatory. It is also enshrined in the Lebanese constitution that protects freedom of expression, and the right to vote, which is one of the basic political rights of citizens.

The panel also discussed the current electoral law and electoral processes that fail to safeguard equality among voters and candidates and, as a result, violate Article 25 of the ICCPR and the Constitutional Council's 1996 Decision that stressed on the importance of safeguarding equality in any electoral law. Furthermore, the apparent randomness and the absence of clear standards in designating electoral districts and the proportional electoral quotient, adopting a very high ceiling for campaign, including "voters' transportation fees" as a legitimate expense, all contribute to a major disparity and unfairness among candidates and electors. Despite all of these shortcomings, the 2018 Electoral Law is a major upgrade to previous laws. Yet, many improvements are necessary to further guarantee justice and fairness.

Guests also shared their mounting concerns of the control that the political class is exerting over voters. Ruling parties continue to engage in non-democratic practices that deny citizens their right to vote freely and hinder the effective participation of emerging groups that are seeking change.

Voters cast their ballots in specific election centers within the zone where they are legally registered and that is, more often than not, under the control of one or more parties. As such, the electoral process often takes place under pressure and elections cannot be free. To give electors the right to cast their vote where they currently reside which may potentially free them from under the control of the ruling class and give them the chance to vote unreservedly, the law stipulated the use of a magnetic electoral card that may facilitate the establishment of a “Mega Center” or, in other words, the chance to vote in one’s place of residence. However, these cards were never issued since the political will is absent and freeing the citizen from constraints and pressures of the political parties does not suit the ruling class.

When it comes to monitoring elections, the Electoral Reform Coalition (LADE, Maharat, the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA) and the Lebanese Union for Persons with Disabilities (LUPD)) aims at monitoring and pressuring the ruling class to respect the electoral timeline and is focusing on the role of the media, the technicalities of the electoral process, transparency and the access and ability of persons with disabilities to participate in elections.

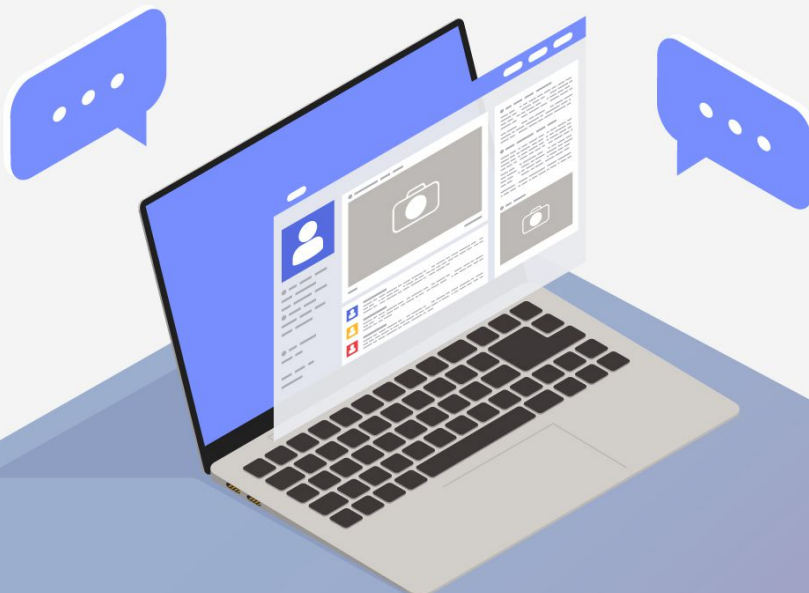
While many emphasized the importance of independent monitoring of elections and the role of the Supervisory Commission for Elections, some doubted the benefits of outsourcing this responsibility to foreign bodies and stressed on the importance of having a permanent and invested supervision that is more likely to be impactful.

Newly emerging political parties that are seeking change will most probably continue to face the ruling class that seeks to win the elections and preserve its gains. That is why it is important for these emerging parties to have a united front and agree on 2 to 3 main ideas that are clear and can resonate with the public. They should build on success stories such as the mobilization efforts that resulted in unprecedented numbers of the diaspora registering to vote. It is undeniable that there is a growing new political discourse and seeds for change are slowly and steadily being sowed.

Finally, we should all: “push for parliamentary elections in order to save democracy in Lebanon” (Laury Hatayan).

## Recommendations

- ▶ Promote freedoms and the right to free speech in preparation for the upcoming election.
- ▶ Break the barrier of fear of the ruling political parties.
- ▶ Raise awareness on the importance of participation in the upcoming elections especially among those opposing the ruling class.
- ▶ Push for the establishment of a “mega center” that can guarantee more freedom for electors to vote without any pressure from their community or family and give the right to vote at one’s place of residence.
- ▶ Empower change seeking groups to unify their ranks and establish an alliance that promotes collaboration and networking
- ▶ Encourage all regions to express their opinions and needs, and create local discourses that reflect the particularity of each region.
- ▶ Promote oversight before and during elections to ensure transparency and to limit clientelism and the ruling class’ attempts to circumvent the law for their own benefit.



## Panel 2: Participation and Representation of Women, Youths and Marginalized Groups

This second panel first touched upon the feminist struggle in Lebanon that dates all the way back to 195. From a legal perspective, Lebanon is bound by International Treaties that safeguard the rights of all including women. However, periodic reviews result in non-binding recommendations for governments to meet their commitments. Lebanese politicians know very well that these recommendations do not amount to more than mere advice and violations to treaties seldom results in any repercussions. They often make a few trivial concessions to give the impression that change is underway without making significant adjustments. As such, passing on political seats to wives, sisters or daughters is far from genuine feminist representation and from the change needed in terms of real equality between women and men. However, many political groups, traditional or emerging, are starting to get on board with the feminist demands. Whether they are doing it to play the “trendy gender card” or because they actually believe in the importance of equal representation, ensuring a 30% women’s quota among party members is definite progress and should be celebrated as a first step in the right direction.

The panel also discussed the lessons learned from the experience of the youths in political activism especially following the October 17 Revolution and stressed on the importance of a secular and feminist discourse. “Change is, without a doubt, a result of steady, and perhaps, slow buildups in the right direction. However, a transformative moment, like October 17, can swiftly turn everything upside down” (Verena El Amil).

Additionally, the panel tackled the many challenges that LGBTIQ persons face in Lebanon. A study conducted by Oxfam in Lebanon identified 3 priority concerns for LGBTIQ persons: (1) safe spaces and housing that were further impacted by the economic crisis and the Beirut Port explosion that affected areas traditionally considered to LGBTIQ inclusive; (2) access to assistance, healthcare and other basic services that often exclude queer persons; and (3) access to mental health services which is a demand for all under the current circumstances but especially for LGBTIQ persons who are, more often than not, among those most affected by any crisis. These 3 priorities should be included in any change seeking political discourse instead of focusing solely on amending article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code which is, evidently, not at the top of the community’s list of demands.

It is important to recognize the numerous obstacles that transpersons face including when seeking to cast their votes; they are often harassed and discriminated against because their gender identity and expression do not match their ID markers. LGBTIQ persons are electors and members of parties and political movements. There is no need to create a separate group for queer persons. The responsibility to ensure that the electoral discourse of political groups is progressive and intersectional is obviously shared by LGBTIQ members of these parties. The panel also mentioned the importance of using clear and non-controversial scientific terms to help develop a progressive discourse founded on a rights-based approach that protects and ensure equality among all individuals. Finally, guests emphasized the importance of expanding safe spaces and safeguarding freedom of expression. As such, upholding freedom of expression in all its forms and the right to vote without any constraints are the foundation for effective and free participation and for fair representation of women, youths and marginalized groups in political life.

## Recommendations

- ▶ Adopt an intersectional rights-based approach that protects all groups in society without exception as citizens, first and foremost, equal in rights and responsibilities.
- ▶ Adopt a new political discourse that is progressive and that tackles the specific needs of women, youths and marginalized groups
- ▶ Showcase that the true participation of women, youths and marginalized groups in politics in Lebanon can only be achieved when all their other rights are also fulfilled.
- ▶ Push for safeguarding the right of LGBTIQ persons to freely express themselves and raise awareness on their right to vote and participate in political life without discrimination.





### Panel 3: The Role of Media in Elections

The third and final panel shed light on the important role that the media plays in shadowing and influencing the parliamentary elections.

Mainstream media are funded by politicians or by businessmen closely associated with political families which greatly controls their editorial strategies. Furthermore, TV and radio networks perceive the elections season as an opportunity to secure more funding and, subsequently, end up giving more airtime to the wealthy political class instead of emerging political groups seeking change.

Alternative media, on the other hand, can, without a doubt, play an important role in influencing and shifting the traditional political discourse. For example, alternative media are much more willing to cover the story of a group of schoolgirls in Tripoli standing up to their harasser. Subsequently, many mainstream media who have always been reluctant to engage in human rights issues or stand against the patriarchal system, may have felt compelled to follow in the independent media's footsteps and to cover the story in support of the Tripoli student.

Alternative media can also play a key role in monitoring violations of the electoral law such as giving unequal air time or exceeding the allowed ceiling for campaign funds. Moreover, social media provides innovative and eye-catching tools to spread the message and has proven quite effective to reach younger generations and the diaspora.

Finally, guests emphasized on the media's important role in electoral education and the articulation of clear messages to the public.

## Recommendations

- ▶ Adopt a questioning strategy that pressures the traditional media and especially television broadcasting networks, and relentlessly sheds light on any violations they may commit before, during and after the completion of the electoral process.
- ▶ Dedicate a space to groups that are seeking change so they can present their ideas, politics and goals.
- ▶ Scale up electoral education and highlight infractions in an effort to limit them. Devise innovative tools to communicate with the public depending on their location, age, etc.
- ▶ Continue to encourage the Lebanese diaspora to take part in the electoral process.

## Conclusion

The discussion that took place under the title "Freedoms and Elections" constitutes a space for freedom and democracy and a step that encourages exercising the right to vote and holding elections on their constitutional time in order to preserve democracy in Lebanon.

The recommendations to protect the democratic electoral process, which guarantees the participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups, by expressing their opinion and exercising their right to vote freely; and to document some of the demands of emerging groups that bear an intersectional feminist rights approach, aim to protect and ensure equality among all members of society in rights and in responsibilities.



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