

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

OPEN LETTER

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Open letter to Lebanon's political leaders urging them to place human rights at the centre of their election campaigns

Dear Political leader

I write in advance of Lebanon's national elections on 7 June 2009 to urge you and other political leaders to put human rights at the centre of your election campaign and to commit to support a clear and comprehensive agenda for human rights reform if elected to office in the new parliament or government.

For far too long, political divisions and other factors have hindered the full realisation of human rights in Lebanon. Now, however, the forthcoming elections represent a new and historic opportunity to build upon the period following the Doha Agreement of last May, the formation of the national unity government and the subsequent election of Michel Suleiman as President. They provide an opportunity to bring change - to firmly entrench the protection and promotion of human rights in both the law and in practice.

The approaching elections, I am sure, will be keenly contested. They must also be contested in a manner that respects human rights – I urge you and all other political leaders to instruct those campaigning on your behalf to display respect for freedom of expression, assembly and other rights essential to the conduct of political life.

Recent months have brought some important, positive human rights developments although these still need to be further consolidated. In particular, Lebanon's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture in December 2008 sent a powerful signal that torture and other ill-treatment of prisoners, so long a widespread form of abuse, will no longer be tolerated. As well, a draft law to abolish the death penalty is under active consideration, and it has been clearly recognized that concrete action is needed to improve the conditions of the many thousands of foreign migrant domestic workers who help underpin the national economy and of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who continue to live in Lebanon.

These are encouraging signs that Lebanon is truly moving away from the years of violence and that the people of Lebanon, in all their diversity, share a common path.

The establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, while controversial, also represents a most significant break with the past insofar as it challenges the long cycle of impunity that hitherto facilitated, even encouraged, the commission of gross human rights abuses. That the Tribunal had to be created at all and sit in The Hague, however, underscores the frailty of Lebanon's judicial system and the urgent need to reform it in order to ensure its independence and to guarantee that all who come before it receive fair trials.

As well, the creation of the Tribunal points directly to the need to ensure that all those whose human rights are violated have access to justice and reparation. If the Tribunal is left to stand

alone, it will appear as selective justice and its credibility will be in question. It must be accompanied by complementary measures and mechanisms to ensure that all allegations of human rights violations are investigated, promptly and properly, and that those who perpetrate such violations are held to account. Impunity must be removed for all those who commit torture, unlawful killings or other serious human rights abuses. I urge you to commit, clearly and unreservedly, to achieving this.

The current parliament has been developing a national Human Rights Action Plan. I welcomed this initiative during my last visit to Lebanon one year ago, and hope that the work on the plan will continue following the new elections and accelerate. Building on the progress that has been achieved in recent months, I call on all Lebanese political leaders to support this process and to make available the time and resources necessary to ensure that a far-reaching programme of human rights reform is incorporated in this national plan and is implemented as a high priority during the lifetime of the next parliament – and to make clear their commitment to this in their parties' election manifestoes.

Sixty years after Lebanon played a key role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the cornerstone of modern international human rights law, I call on you to take a lead in giving effect to the principles which underscore the Declaration and to ensuring that every man, woman and child in Lebanon has full access to their human rights, and to the protection of the state in exercising those rights.

Amnesty International has identified five steps which we urge you to support and to commit to implement if and when you are elected to office:

- Reform the justice system to ensure it is independent and to guarantee fair trials;
- End all arbitrary detention and torture and other ill-treatment;
- End impunity for grave human rights violations and establish mechanisms to ensure justice, truth and reparation for victims of past gross abuses of human rights;
- End all discrimination and violence and other abuses against women and members of marginalised groups;
- Enact legislation to abolish the death penalty for all crimes.

Now is the time to put human rights at the forefront and to turn the page on the abuses of the past. I urge you to take the opportunity of the forthcoming elections to do so.

Yours faithfully

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Secretary General
Amnesty International

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