**For an election reality check, visit your local mukhtar**
Forgetting all the hype about Lebanon's supposed recent march toward democracy becomes painfully easy when government officials do their best to discourage you from voting. Sweep aside, for a moment, the blazing rhetoric of opposition leaders, the tide of "people power" that recently flooded Beirut's streets and the relentless cries for accountability from the international community - which had largely remained silent about the fate of the country for decades.
Instead, for a closer view of reality, visit the office of your mukhtar - the elected local administrative official who has a say on everything from the issuing of identity papers to voter registration. It is among the mukhtars that you will find Lebanon's entrenched political dynamics as they were long long ago, with good prospects for its being stubbornly carried on for centuries to come.
I vote in the North this Sunday, and determined weeks ago to make it to the ballot box. I have my "Independence 2005" bumper sticker and was among those million or so flag-waving protestors who caught the world's attention on March 14, when, for the first time, it seemed plausible to imagine change in Lebanon, and maybe, just maybe, the fading away of political dynasties and mafia-like behavior.
As we approach the final round of elections, I can't help but relive the tumultuous events of the past months - the carnage when former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed, the sorrow during his funeral, the countless nights anxiously anticipating the next bomb blast, and even the concerts and "unity" marathon that were later organized to help everyone forget their sharp ideological differences. Sadly, with everyone's mindset today switched to election matters, those differences are amplified, and nepotism is at an all-time high.
I learned this lesson when I recently sought out my mukhtar to apply for an election card to vote. Ridiculous enough was the fact that Lebanese law forces me to vote in my village of origin, a remote place I rarely ever visit. But that was nothing compared to the mukhtar's curt response when I asked to apply for the election card: "I have nothing to do with the elections this year," he said when my father and I arrived in his small office. "Why do you want to vote? Nobody is voting! We are not voting. I am not voting. There is no contest! It's no use," he sputtered.
The rapid-fire diatribe had its intended effect on my father, who was not very excited with the prospect of voting anyway - the first time he would have ever done so. At that point, I jumped in with a question: "Don't we have the right to vote?" The mukhtar continued to rummage through his desk unfazed. "It's my first time and I want to vote," I continued. "I am a journalist."
The prospect of negative exposure seemed to work. As if under a spell, the mukhtar offered no more excuses. He suddenly began rushing around, gathered up our application forms, asked for passport photos and stamped and signed away. Sitting on a vintage vinyl chair with a wobbly leg, I watched the tornado in action. I noticed that behind the mukhtar's desk he had put up a large poster of Mecca, courtesy of Saudi Arabian airlines, as well as a vintage photograph of his grandfather donning a headscarf.
Days later, I contacted the Tripoli parliamentarian Mosbah al-Ahdab, to ask his views about the incident. Ahdab told me that the mukhtar was probably allied with former Prime Minister Omar Karami, who had announced he would boycott the elections. Last February, Karami resigned amid massive street demonstrations calling for an end to the Syrian presence and the departure of his Syrian-backed government.
"What he is doing is illegal," said Ahdab, a rival of Karami, who is running on a list sponsored by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated former prime minister. "You have a bunch of people who don't want change, and this is not democracy."
Not long ago, when Syrian hegemony was at its height, people enforced such obstinacy by shooting off guns in the air, Ahdab went on. At least those days are over, it seems. "Don't force people to do things, this is what we are saying," Ahdab explained. "If you think what is happening is a scandal, then you should run and have people vote for you."
But still, I wondered. Even if it was sincere, the fiery rhetoric heard in Beirut in the weeks of protests following Hariri's murder could take decades to make its way into the minds of my mukhtar, his cronies, and the thousands - if not the tens of thousands - of people like them across the country. Could mentalities ever change? Could people ever be convinced that voting should be regarded as a private decision; or that for an elected administrative official to flaunt his religion - whatever that religion is - or to tout his family lineage, did not help build up public credibility?
At least we know it wasn't a reputation for efficiency that landed the mukhtar his job. Before leaving, I asked about my application for an identification card submitted to his office three years earlier. The mukhtar leaned over, shuffled through twisted bundles of paper in his drawer, and concluded that the form had been rejected on a technicality, collecting dust since. The delay, he said nonchalantly, was due to a malfunctioning fingerprinting press in Beirut.
With risible optimism, I decided to re-submit the application form. My father and I made our way home, thinking about election day.