

Civil marriage in lebanon politics essay



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Civil marriage has lately become a controversial issue in Lebanon. The media has been publicizing it quite intensively. It has even become a political issue debatable by most parties on both side of the political divide. The concept of civil marriage has gained much territory in this country and has already reached a point of no return. As such it can no longer be neglected or forgotten. Nowadays, civil marriage is legalised in most countries. It should, in fact, be encouraged here in Lebanon for several reasons.

First, civil marriage is a right for believers and non-believers alike who wish not to marry in any or under the auspices of the religious institutions. In the absence of civil marriage, both believers and non-believers have only one choice: getting married in religious institutions. Civil marriage does not exclude religious ceremonies; it complements them, if so desired. The crux of the matter here is the right of choice. Lebanon does not offer that choice yet.

MP Ghassan Mokheiber is one of the few politicians who support civil marriage in Lebanon, " it should be one of the basic rights" for the Lebanese people (Mahdawi, March 19, 2010). There is, nevertheless, a bright side to this issue. Despite the fact that the Lebanese people are deprived of this right on their own territory, they are, however, not deprived from their country's recognition of their right to have their civil marriages carried out abroad. So, a couple who engaged in a civil marriage abroad is entitled to have their marriage fully recognized in Lebanon. Upon its return to Lebanon, the couple's marriage is both legitimate and legal.

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Second, civil marriage is a blessing for men and women from different religious backgrounds who wish to enter into mixed marriage. In fact, it is the best refuge for secular arrangements. The progress of the secular culture has forced a regression of the religious option. This transfer of authority away from religious onto civil jurisdiction means that the power of regulating people's lives now lie in the hands of elected appointed civil officials. The clergy, stripped of its formal authority to regulate people's civil lives, can no longer influence people's choices in a secular state. In a country where civil marriage is practiced, the presence of a civil official simply validates the marital bonds of a bride and a groom away from religious conventional practices and authority. It is then a strictly civil affair.

A clear illustration is when Rafik, a Druze, and Jeanette, a Catholic, decide to get married in Cyprus. Irrespective of their faiths, they can be joined in matrimony in a country where civil marriage is common practice. Rafik and Jeanette would have encountered several obstacles if they were got married in Lebanon. The first obstacle is that when one member of the couple is obliged to change to the religion of the other member; it seems as a conflict between religions. Given the society in Lebanon, most likely Jeanette will be the one to change. Furthermore, Druzes are not allowed to marry from another faith. Normally, people are born Druze. So, from a Lebanese religious stance, a Druze marrying a Christian would not be possible. Besides, Jeanette's family cannot allow for her to marry into a community other than Christian. Things can become even more complicated knowing that both Jeanette and Rafik are irreligious. Hence, the only solution for Jeanette and Rafik is to get married in Cyprus

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before a civil official leaving all their religious troubles as well as their religion-driven social taboos and customs behind them. Upon their return to Lebanon, the Lebanese authorities will legalize their civil marriage. Their married civilian status will then be clearly indicated on all their civilian extracts (No Civil Marriages in Lebanon).

Third, civil marriage in Lebanon is a major step toward reinforcing interreligious dialogue. It helps build one Lebanese identity, which, in turn, will lead to a successful and healthy melting pot. One very important political decision consistent with this objective was taken as late as the mid 1990's. It was decreed that the religious denominations on identity cards be banned. This was the only successful of several failed attempts since the 1950's to legalize civil marriage in Lebanon (CopperWiki). Opponents, however, have always had the upper hand – probably they were more vocal and more powerful. Their source of power could be either due to their formal position or to their leadership capabilities.

One such attempt took place in 1998 when President Elias Hrawi was very close from introducing civil marriage into the Lebanese system. At that time, Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and some other ministers objected (Mahdawi, March 19, 2010). The reason why Hariri didn't accept to sign the bill was that “ Lebanon is not ready yet.” Same as Hariri, and on the other end of the religious panorama, Lebanon's Maronite Christian Patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, declared that civil marriage is “ not in the line with the teachings of the Church.” He also added that “ Solidarity with Lebanon's

Muslim community” is a need (Yeranian, May 6, 1998, p. 7). These negative voices have appropriately sparked many bitter criticisms. How does he want to establish this “solidarity” if he’s an opponent of civil marriage, in the time that civil marriage

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is almost the only solution to live that solidarity? In another trial in 2002, human rights activists re-shed the lights on civil marriage, but unfortunately, without any success (Ajami, August 3, 2007).

Finally, the simplicity and the expediency of civil marriage are far more convenient than the traditional ones. One blessing is not to worry about any delays or religious constraints. The presence of a civil official or a judge to join the couple is the only requirement. It is a practical arrangement for couples-to-be. A civil wedding ceremony may be arranged much faster than that of a traditional wedding. Moreover, civil ceremonies tend to be a favorite option given the budget-conscious couples. In fact, thousands of singles go through the civil marriage never to regret it.

“For the Lebanese, Cyprus is Las Vegas. Not for gambling, but ... for marriage. While Las Vegas is the destination of choice for Americans looking to get married quickly, for the 400 Lebanese couples who travel to Cyprus every year seeking civil marriages, the decision is more calculated,” (Luca, August 26, 2009). Besides, it is a most convenient half-an hour away refuge from Lebanon. In Cyprus, an average wedding costs less than \$1,000; this sum represents 1% compared to the cost of a marriage that often reached thousands and thousands of dollars in Lebanon (Ajami, August 27, 2007).

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Civil marriage turns to be some kind of business where there are big financial profits. The famous slogan of Cyprus' civil marriage is " Just say I do... we'll do the rest." The " rest" costs between \$1, 200 and \$1, 900.

(Luca, August 26, 2009).

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Civil Marriage is just one chapter under the much bigger umbrella of civil society reforms that Lebanon needs to undergo badly. Other related problems that need to be addressed with equal urgency and importance include gender equality, child custody and divorce, which are all very closely related. Together with civil marriage, as and when updated, they compose the base for civil society. The current society relies on a complicated mix of religion. The first step towards modernization of our society should be its deconfessionalization. Religious leaders should be " told" to restrict their role to spiritual business specifically. Once our society turns secular, then other social issues, including civil marriage, would be addressed much more effectively. It is clear now that all the good and valid causes and benefits are there for as an immediate implementation of civil marriage regulations as possible. There is quite a dichotomy in the present situation: Civil marriage isn't allow in Lebanon; while it is recognized if perform elsewhere. To many Lebanese the solution is very simple and could satisfy both sides: make of civil marriage a choice for interested couple (Mattar Law). The key to this solution is politicians, taking a courageous decision to launch the appropriate and serious workshop toward the implementation of civil marriages in Lebanon. The quicker such a decision, the quicker the solution. But, will it ever occur? And if so, how soon?

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