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Lebanon: 7 June elections a key opportunity for human rights

Lebanon's upcoming national elections, due on 7 June, present a unique opportunity for the country's political leaders to commit themselves and their parties to introducing long-needed human rights reforms, Amnesty International said today as it published a five-point human rights agenda for Lebanon.

“These elections come at a critical juncture for Lebanon. They provide a key opportunity for the country's political leaders to put human rights at the centre of their parties' agendas and to turn the page on the abuses of the past and the systematic impunity that surrounded and fostered them,” said Malcolm Smart, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. “We are appealing to all Lebanon's political leaders to seize the moment and not to let this pivotal opportunity pass.”

The eight-page report identifies five key areas for reform by the new government that will take office after the elections. “The justice system needs a thorough overhaul as it lacks independence, is not impartial and still allows military courts to try civilians in breach of international standards,” said Malcolm Smart. “With the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, those responsible for the killing of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri may now be brought to justice, but the creation of the Tribunal also underscores the need for reform of the justice system and for complementary mechanisms to be established to ensure that perpetrators of other grave human rights crimes are also held fully to account - or else the Special Tribunal may be seen as little more than 'selective justice'.”

Last week, four Lebanese military and security heads who had been arrested following the killing of Rafic Hariri in 2005 were released after 44 months in detention without charge or trial. “Unfortunately, their experiences were not at all unique,” said Malcolm Smart. “For far too long, Lebanon's security forces have arrested suspects and subjected them to detention without charge or trial, and sometimes to torture or other ill-treatment, and they have been permitted to do so with impunity. These practices must be stopped and the security forces must be required to obey and uphold the law.”

In the report, Amnesty International also calls for government action to address the legacy of past human rights abuses and to end discrimination and violence against women, including foreign domestic workers, and members of other marginalized groups, such as the thousands of Palestinian refugees who continue to live in Lebanon but who face legal and other obstacles in accessing basic human rights. It calls too for the abolition of the death penalty, noting that no executions have been carried out in Lebanon for several years.

“The past year has seen a number of positive human rights developments and the drafting by parliament of a Human Rights Action Plan that, if implemented, could provide a much-needed framework for future reform,” said Malcolm Smart. “Lebanon's leaders should embrace these developments and use the opportunity of the elections to commit to the implementation of a clear and comprehensive agenda for human rights reform if elected to office in the new parliament or government.”