

Middle East
MAI GHOUSSOUB

There are a few trees left in Beirut, but their branches are no longer to be seen. Large pictures of men are hanging on them. There are many grey concrete buildings in Lebanon (we call them boxes). They are now quite colourful thanks to the multitude of men's portraits covering their facades. There is a wonderful old building on Sodeco square: a magnificent skeleton reminding us incessantly of the civil war and its destructive power. It is no longer proudly defying the developers who want to erase it to plague Beirut with another concrete box. It stands there like a desolate past looking helplessly at the ridicule it has to endure: its ornate old columns have been turned into hangers for the pictures of more men, more wishful candidates in the Lebanese parliamentary elections of August 2000.



PHOTO: MAI GHOUSSOUB

Sodeco Square, Beirut, Lebanon.

Walking through the streets of Beirut, driving through the 'autostrade' that takes you to the north of the country or going south of the capital, you cannot avoid looking up towards these large portraits. You are looking up, but they do not seem to be looking down towards you. For despite their thick moustaches and their desperate efforts, they fail to emanate a sense of authority, of traditional notability and status, a tool essential to any *zaim*, or leader of men. Perhaps this failure is caused by the multitude of juxtaposed and competing pictures. A notable or a leader should, after all, be easily distinguishable from 'all the others'. But with so many pictures of candidates exhibited and so many candidates wishing to be selected, are the individual and his message (on the rare occasion when there is a message behind the candidacy) not totally lost and submerged? These candidates seem to be projecting their image more than they project their candidacy or express any societal concern. According to Freud, 'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego.... The projection of a surface'. Are we not witnessing here a festival of bodily egos, a clumsy and adolescent projection of faces? – face (as in façade) as in *wajih* and *wajih* (*wajih* = notable or man of status; the root of the word

in Arabic is the same as face). Could we be looking at an exuberant, Mediterranean explosion of masculine self-presentation? Are these thousands of faces telling us something about Lebanese politics today and the state of democracy in post-war Lebanon?

Elections are not always about politics

'When something is about masculinity, it isn't always about men' wrote Eve Sedgwick in *Constructing Masculinity*.¹ Looking at the pictures of these male candidates hanging above and around the city, trying to convince us to vote for them in the parliamentary elections, it is tempting to say: 'In Lebanon, when something is about parliamentary elections, it is not always about politics'. What are these pictures, which have changed the landscape and colour of Lebanese streets, roads and public places, telling us about the state of the country, its real or imagined identities, the anxieties of its citizens and the responsibilities of its leaders and representatives? Do they reflect the changing patterns of power and domination after the trauma of war or are they merely caricatures of its old traditions and uncertain modernity? On the surface, one is tempted to believe that these pictures, often carrying no written message except for the name of the candidate, seem to be saying: 'Look at me, I am here, I am a candidate. Thus I exist. I am not a nobody'. But this simple message is very revealing and essential to the assessment of the place of the individual in Lebanese society today. This visual message is an outcry for prestige and social status in a small Mediterranean society, where concepts like reputation and 'what the neighbours say or think' are still very effective and determining factors in people's behaviour. It is a longing for power that is now reconciled with the idea of being reduced to a much smaller scale (the big matters being increasingly decided upon by non-elected forces and often in the interest of neighbouring countries). This visual exhibition tells us about a society that has not cut its umbilical cord with its old traditions in which its leaders and rulers excelled at negotiating authority, gaining access to benefits and wealth through networks and alliances be it under Ottoman rule, during the French Mandate or in the post-colonial era.

Lebanon as a republican fraternity?

'By the end of the 1920s, three conflicted modes of reconstituted authority emerged and stood in tension with one another, based on paternalistic privilege, republican fraternity and universal democracy' wrote Elizabeth Thompson.² It is frightening how this description of Lebanon in the 20s could be repeated when looking at our candidates and the multitude of expressions they are bestowing upon us from their studio made or photo-shop portraits. Paternalism is defi-

nately present in some faces that are projecting a secure middle-aged man behind respectable moustaches and the advent – just a touch – of greying hair near his temples. The large, if not gigantic, size of the poster is aiming not only at taking our attention away from the multitude of middle-sized portraits, but also at making us feel like children looking up to their father. The same moustaches³ above a large smile are definitely aiming at projecting a cool, brotherly atmosphere. The candidate may be the son of an old *bey*, he may be just a rich fellow, or a returning millionaire emigrant, but he is still like us. He seems to be so easy-going that we could give him a tap on the shoulder. Yes! Lebanon is a republican fraternity. Lebanon is indeed a modern country, a universal democracy – look at the portraits: all the candidates are dressed in Western-type suits with austere ties; they are trying to charm us, normal mortals, into voting for them. They are all presenting themselves as free and autonomous individuals. There is no mention of coalitions, of Syrian veto or the influence of large families on these portraits. Like all photographic pictures, they express an indisputable truth, but not all of it.

Perhaps we can try to read what the pictures do not say. The following are statements made by 'citizens' conversing about the elections in August:

'X has made a small fortune in Africa, he thinks that now he can stand on a list instead of the traditional notable of his area.'

'This candidate is hoping to make some money, he is only there in order to be paid off to retract from the race (by a prestigious candidate whose prestige is hurt by the presence of an opponent). Indeed a real notable should not have opponents, his prestige and authority alone should intimidate any pretentious candidate.'

'Who ever heard of ... before the war? His father was an office boy. Heads of militias and thieves are now filling our parliament.'

People argue, they make cynical remarks, but they end up voting. They will vote in their village or town of origin. They may have lived and worked for ages in a town where their parents were not born, it does not matter. This system has hindered the development of Lebanese democracy and tied the individual to his or her family's allegiances and concerns. When an engineer, a teacher or a state employee goes to vote for a candidate born in the same place as his father and father's father, the concerns, hopes and frustrations of the large family are more at stake than the decisions and policies of the candidate and his influence on the parliament.

The various tales of masculinity

The photo-portraits present a large array of masculine traits, from the wise intellectual behind professional glasses, to the securing smile of a friendly candidate. One candidate in the Bekaa Valley decided to present himself doing fitness exercises in his garden! If the photographs of the candidates tell us something about men and politics in Lebanon, they speak of conflicting images or more accurately of juxtaposed value systems and of a democracy torn between some of its rooted traditions and its congenital infirmities. The posters speak of men who call for your democratic vote while giving in to clientelism and dictatorial impositions from higher instances. The few female candidates hardly change anything in the male panorama that dominates the facades of the country.

It is significant that the written messages, when available, are as insipid as possible: *Ma bi sih illa as-Sahih* (Only the right thing is right!) is the slogan under the Prime Minister's electoral portrait. Sometimes the messages betray a ridiculous paranoia: the slogan of an incognito candidate tells us 'Don't be afraid, I am with you'. Many large posters on the road to Tripoli contained different landscapes of Lebanon placed, thanks to photo-shop techniques, as a background to the candidate's portrait. One rich immigrant raised slogans calling, out of the blue and in full contradiction with his Clark Gable postures, for women's emancipation.

Lebanon, in this new landscape, seems to be preparing for a carnival rather than for its new parliament. The words of the poet Nadia Tueni come to mind: 'My country tells me...do take me seriously'. In order to feel better about it all, I recall the days, those terrible days, when the facades of my country were covered with the pictures of martyrs and when the red colour of blood was predominant. Then, I look at the pictures of our candidates and indulge in a little smile of amusement. ♦

Notes

1. Berger, Maurice, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (eds.) (1995), *Constructing Masculinity*. New York: Routledge.
2. Thompson, Elizabeth (2000), *Colonial Citizens, Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. New York: Columbia University Press.
3. On the significance of moustaches and their symbols, see Daoud, Hassan (2000), 'Those Two Heavy Wings of Manhood', *Imagined Masculinities. Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, ed. by Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair Webb. London: Saqi Books.

Mai Ghoussoub is a Lebanese writer and artist who has written widely on culture and Middle Eastern issues. Her latest publications include Leaving Beirut and Imagined Masculinities (co-edited with Emma Sinclair Webb).