

By **Stephen Dockery**
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Policy center calls for broad reform of local governments



Baroud during his short news conference. Azakir

BEIRUT: Lebanon's system of municipalities is woefully crippled with weak administrative powers and unnecessary dependence on central government funding, analysts said Monday.

Speaking at a conference about decentralization at the Monroe Hotel in Beirut, participants said Lebanon's 968 municipalities cannot respond to people's needs and the growing group of municipal unions needed to be replaced by a more effective system in the country.

"We think that decentralization is complicated, but actually it is very simple," said former Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud at the conference. "It's about local entities that are elected with financial and administrative autonomy."

Currently, local officials must get a number of permissions from the central government to carry out many basic decisions. Giving more powers to local governments was a broad stipulation in the 1989 Taif Accords.

Baroud said doing away with municipal unions in favor of directly elected regional councils is the best solution for the country.

The regional councils would be a third layer of administration to give people more say in their government, Baroud said. Currently municipal unions serve that administrative role, but not all municipalities are in a union and members aren't directly elected.

"In Lebanon today the only form of decentralization is the municipality level and the unions of municipalities," Baroud said. "We already explored all the possibilities, now it's a matter of political will to take things another step."

The conference put on by The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies and the Swiss Embassy was used to mark the beginning of a research project by the center on municipality reform and general decentralization of power in Lebanon.

A policy paper issued by the center called for far-reaching reform of the municipal system.

The paper by the executive director of the center Sami Atallah said three quarters of the central government resources are being distributed on an unfair basis.

Atallah wrote that there are over 40 municipalities that don't receive resources proportionally to their population and what funding does come is unpredictable in amount and timing. Atallah called for municipalities' needs to be constantly reassessed.

A number of Lebanon's municipalities obtain only limited funding from the central government, prompting some municipalities to band together to try and attract private investment or contributions from international bodies like the European Union.

The 1989 Taif Accord made broad calls for decentralization reform at the district and smaller unit levels in the country. Officials including the interior minister and president have voiced their support for such proposals but a major legal reform has yet to pass through the government.

Lebanese municipality leaders have been continual advocates of restructuring the local government system to give themselves more decision-making powers, hosting a number of meetings on the issue.

Municipal union presidents from the southern suburbs, and north Lebanon participated in Monday's conference in support of making changes to the government system.

Read more: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Dec-20/157393-policy-center-calls-for-broad-reform-of-local-governments.ashx#ixzz1h492MNaH>

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