

A consultative meeting to discuss incident of woman harassment over swimsuit at Sidon beach

- On June 7, 2023 -

Masar Association held a consultative meeting on Friday, June 2, 2023, in the city of Sidon, following the harassment on May 14 of a woman in swimwear and her husband at Sidon public beach. A group of female and male activists in the southern city attended the meeting to talk over the incident and discuss various views concerning it away from the brouhaha it triggered, as well as to identify and adjust the starting points in order to help Sidon citizens make the right decisions in any upcoming occasions, be it popular, legal, or related to municipal or parliamentary elections.

Men and women activists who took part in the meeting deliberated the following facts:

The main issue here is the assault by a cleric (sheikh), accompanied by a group of young men, on a woman and her husband because she was wearing a swimsuit at the public beach in the city of Sidon, while the security forces did not intervene to arrest or question him, neither did the municipality act to ensure the freedom and safety of the couple and that of beachgoers (mainly women) in bathing suits.

By virtue of the Municipal Act, the municipal council and its president are empowered to “maintain the convenience, safety and public health, only if they do not interfere with the powers given to the security departments in the state ... and all that is related to morals and public decency” (Article 74 of the Municipal Law). Nevertheless, “the municipal council may not interfere in discussing the laws and regulations of the state, nor issue circulars and statements or voice predilections related to politics, religion or public administration” (Article 77 of the Municipal Law). Legally, the sheikh who was upset by the swimsuit should have instead turned to the judiciary, the municipality, or to the police station to complain, and had no right to intimidate the woman and her husband.

Bottomline, is that personal freedoms in Lebanon are inviolable, and they are protected as stated in Article 8 of the Lebanese constitution. The legal path decrees the following: National laws take precedence over the decisions of municipal councils; International treaties ratified by member countries become binding, and therefore those countries are called on to tune their laws in line with these agreements. In a nutshell, this means it is legal for a woman to wear a swimsuit on a public beach, as the beach is the property of the Lebanese state. About «Sidon as a private and conservative city», it is a «pretext» cooked up to encroach on freedoms in Sidon and take the city to a place that encroaches on its public interest. Yet, it is important to recall that “The territory of Lebanon is one for all Lebanese. Every Lebanese citizen has the right to reside in any part thereof, and enjoy it under the sovereignty of the law. Hence, there shall be no classification of citizens on the basis of any affiliation whatsoever. No segregation, no partition, and no inhabitation.” (the Introduction of the Constitution). This renders clichés like for example, “go and swim in your own territory” out of legal context, and only reflect fanaticism, segregation, exclusion and abolition, which we do not want it to pigeon-hole Sidon and its community. Noteworthy to mention, that women’s swimsuit is historically recognized in Lebanon. This is clear in the advertisements of the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism for the year 2023.

The incident of harassment that took place on Sidon beach did not pass, and its consequences were not contained, according to some people, who dubbed it an attempt to forge a new phase that induces the diminishing of private and public freedoms in the name of religion, and to allegedly safeguard the privacy, virtue and chastity of the city, in addition to eating away public spaces that are the right of all diverse citizens. Lebanon is famed for its diversity, which is a distinctive characteristic of the country, and a source of its national wealth if we know how to exalt it. The beach incident is an ember in the ashes that will reawaken with the first breath of air.

Starting points and suggestions:

Keeping in mind that human rights, our rights as male and female citizens, are indivisible, and that they are inter-related and a priority, we demand their protection and effective implementation. We honor the public and private freedoms that are protected by the Lebanese constitution, and therefore, we will go all-out to make the public spaces, including public beaches, an ideal environment for everyone, including women, whether they wear trunks or any other attire, similar to men who wear swim shorts on the public beach. We will work to reposition Sidon to where it deserves to be as Lebanon’s third economic, cultural and touristic city and the melting pot of cultural diversity that boasts a unique relationship with its environs. Noting, that the lack of tourism barebones in Sidon (hotels, amusement centers, festivals...) throughout the year is but a direct cause for the economic stagnation in the southern city.

We intend to speak up through law, culture, organization, convergence, discussion, awareness, resolving matters, and asking Sidon’s municipality to watch over all its citizens, males and females, in agreement with the national laws. We will also ask the two MPs of the city to speak up to the end of enforcing laws on personal freedoms and work to upgrade certain legislations in terms of defining decency and like concepts, when necessary.

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Countries whose constitutions were based on the authority of enjoining good and forbidding evil are losing momentum and influence. Meanwhile, Lebanon, celebrated in history as «beacon of the East», is regressing in the twenty-first century, is that what we hope for?

In practical terms, male and female activists participating in the meeting proposed actions, most notably organizing regular awareness-raising activities and discussions with Sidon inhabitants in public spaces, including reflecting on the “identity” of the city specially with the young generation. Beaches, streets, and sidewalks are for everyone, and we will occupy them with determination, joy, and tolerance.

Educating the female and male citizens of Sidon and all Lebanese regions is crucial to reinforce citizenship, which has gone under sectarian affiliations, a fact that further weakens the state. Society cannot advance and grow through abolition, expiation, intimidation, and the exploitation of religion so as to undermine private and public freedoms. Additionally, the state cannot gain legitimacy and sovereignty when society lags behind justice and democracy.

It is important that all male and female citizens in Sidon identify their preferences in the democratic process in the upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections. Our role as civil society activists is to present options at hand and to reassess them with the people.

- End of statement of position -