

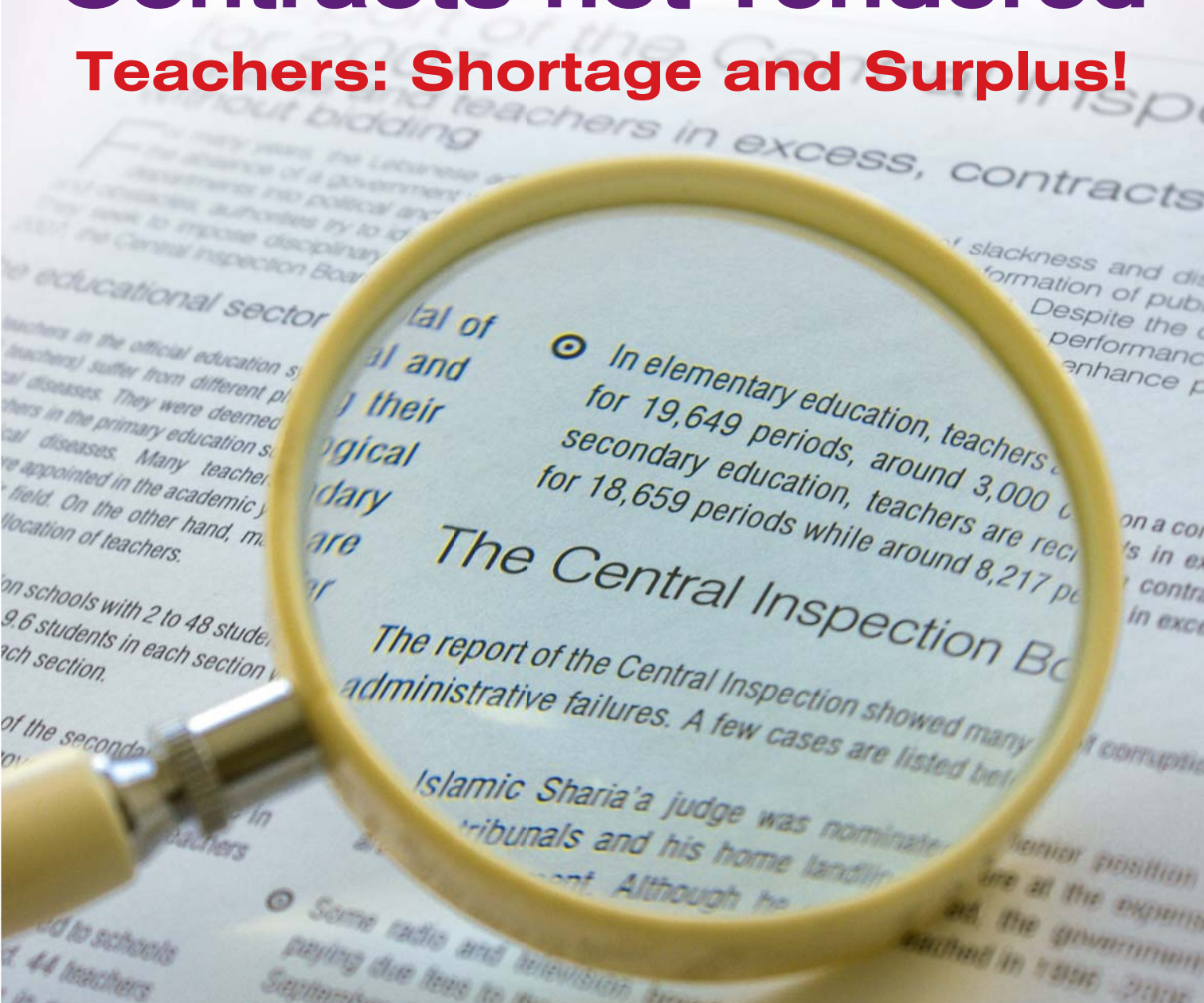
Revenues of the Independent Municipal Fund for 2006

Consumer Price Index: Dec 2007 - Dec 2008

The Monthly meets the Malaysian Ambassador to Lebanon

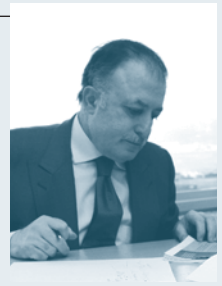
95% of Awarded Contracts not Tendered

Teachers: Shortage and Surplus!



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Citizen Zero Dreaming of Trains and Libraries



Citizen Zero decided, this time, to visit Beirut Book Exhibition. Recalling an article from *The Monthly* published in issue 12 of June 2003, he felt nothing has changed. So here it is:

According to a recent poll conducted by Information International (Ii), the Lebanese do not read. “Why are you surprised?” asked a colleague. “The president of the most powerful nation in the world doesn’t read either.” Suspecting that the poll results might be too gloomy, I polled a dozen other people. The outcome confirmed the poll.

Some claim that television and the Internet have taken over, but another poll, also conducted by Ii, shows that only 33.6% of those using the Internet do so for research purposes. The rest are more interested in chat rooms or pornography. People in Lebanon only read if they have to. At Ii, it is part of their job; in schools and universities, it is a requirement; and in society, it is to see their photos and read their news, including those of people they despise.

A Lebanese writer from the 1940s once remarked: “In Lebanon, we have a gun in every house instead of a library.” Yes, we go to churches, mosques, and clubs and watch talk and entertainment shows in increasing numbers, as demonstrated by another poll, but we do not read. The fact is that 40% of the population does not read—neither newspapers, magazines, nor books. We must commend them for their honesty. It is the contradictory response of the remaining 60% that raises questions and eyebrows.

The so-called ‘readers’ are divided into three main categories: newspaper, magazine and book readers, with each category representing roughly one third. The loyal daily readers represent a small percentage, since the majority read a paper or more ‘from time to time’. There are, however, very small percentages of people who read one or more papers daily. Those must be a dying breed. The majority of those who claimed they read books could not remember the title or author of the last book they read. In addition, the average budget spent by those who claimed that they read is

LL 18,000 per month, bearing in mind that almost half of them borrow their reading material. Some may argue that this figure is not bad for a country that has a minimum wage of LL 300,000 (at the time when this article was published in June 2003) while others contend that it is too little for a population that has more than one million cellular lines. Religious books are read more than others, which must please the advocates of the clash of civilizations theory.

There are people in the world who have decided to simply quit reading. They have their philosophical and emotional reasons. But the Lebanese, it seems, have not yet even started reading. Something the poll did not have an answer for: Who is happier? The readers or the non-readers? When a colleague threw that question at Citizen Zero, he said: “It doesn’t matter, though I do miss seeing people reading in trains and public libraries.”

“But we have neither in Lebanon,” his colleague replied.

So Citizen Zero decided to start constructing a railroad from Halba to Sour and a public library in Sahet Al-Borj (Martyrs Square), of course all of this in his dreams.

