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## The politics of religion

### Personal status laws: Legal framework and common practices

Lebanon is characterized by the unusual degree of its cultural and confessional diversity in the region, owing to the presence of 18 official religious sects, each possessing its own councils, organizations and civic regulations. However, at times throughout the country's history, this pluralism has been a significant factor in heightening confessional divisions, causing friction rather than strengthening Lebanon's national identity.

In this issue, Ii explores the distinctive character of the country's pluralism by looking at the different regulations that govern marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption in the main sects, as well as the actual practices that prevail.

#### The Lebanese constitution and religious freedom

Article No. 7 of Lebanon's constitution states that: "all Lebanese are equal before the law, have equal civil and political rights, and are liable and responsible for their general duties without discrimination."

Article No. 9 guarantees: "absolute freedom of belief, under which the government must respect all religions and confessions, and guarantee and protect the freedom to practice religious rituals, on the condition that it does not disturb public order. In addition, the government guarantees citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliation, respect for their personal status rights and religious interests."

However, many critics argue that the application of different laws by different sects has been the cause of inequality among Lebanese citizens.

This is reflected in the rules and regulations that govern divorce, for instance, in which some sects permit divorce, while others forbid it – with the latter act, if undertaken, considered punishable by law.

#### The Lebanese sects

Official recognition of a sect conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters. Decree No. 60 dated 13 March 1936 delineated the country's many sects as follows:

#### • Christian sects (12)

- Maronite
- Greek Orthodox
- Catholic
- Armenian Orthodox (Gregorian)
- Armenian Catholic
- Syriac Orthodox
- Syriac Catholic
- Eastern Assyrian Orthodox
- Chaldean
- Latin (Catholic of the Latin rite)
- Evangelist
- Coptic Orthodox (this church was established by Law No. 553 dated 24 July 1996)

#### • Muslim Sects (5)

- Sunni
- Shiia
- Druze
- Alawite
- Ishmaelite

#### • The Israelite sect

#### Legal framework governing personal status

The various laws and decisions that regulate personal status are explored on the following pages by sect.

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