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Surprise: TV coverage of Lebanon's elections is partisan

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BEIRUT, June 5, 2009 (MENASSAT) – For weeks, the question on the minds of many monitoring the Lebanese media in the run up to the June 7 parliamentary vote was – don't things change even a little during elections?

According to Rima Farah, a program director with the opposition aligned Christian OTV channel, the answer is absolutely not - especially when partisan media rules the editorial slant of just about every news item broadcast or printed in Lebanon.

This year, however, the election is widely seen as the most historic since the end of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, and could signify a shift in government towards the Hezbollah-led political opposition.

Thus, media outlets on both sides of the political divide have exhibited particular ruthlessness in asserting their positions – especially on television - shutting out the voices of any dissenting political opinions.

OTV program director Farah told MENASSAT, guests or analysts from Future Current TV (aligned with the pro-western March 14 coalition) would always stonewall or refuse to appear on OTV's talk shows.

Farah said illness was a common excuse. "These same guests would then appear on another (pro-March 14) TV show at around the same time and appear in very good health."

It's a familiar refrain even without elections fever.

May Chidiac, a prominent journalist who survived an assassination attempt in September 2005, walked away from her popular magazine news show "Bi Kol Jour'a" (With Boldness) in February because guests from the opposition Christian Free Patriotic Movement had avoided her program for 2-months, she said.

Chidiac revealed, "Guests from the (opposition) Free Patriotic Movement were being banned from appearing on my show."

"I will not accept degrading behavior from anyone in this industry – and now I can't pretend to be objective," Chidiac said.

Objective media?

Left-leaning New Television (NTV) has largely been praised for its coverage of the elections, and NTV news anchors interviewed said they rarely had problems securing guests from either side of the Lebanese political divide.

Journalist Goerge Saliba told MENASSAT that Lebanese politicians showed general confidence in NTV, but admitted all of the channels suffered from a cautious political elite responding to a fevered elections campaign process.

"TV producers and journalists also have to be smart about the guests they choose. This means assuring that there are no personal issues between guests that might strain the spirit of a healthy debate," Saliba said.

But prominent Future Party MP Mustafa Hashim told MENASSAT that he called NTV recently to ask why they have never hosted him once in the last four years.

Renowned talk show host on LBC's (pro-government Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation) program "Kalam Al Nass," Marcel Ghanem said he had never had problems securing guests from either side of the political divide.

"As the elections neared, my phone rang even more than usual. Politicians called to check on me, to congratulate me about a previous show, and to tell me about shocking information," Ghanem said.

"And they all end up inquiring about participating in the show."

But MP Antoine Zahra from the March 14 coalition has in fact refused to appear on Kalam Al Nass.

Zahra claimed the LBC show did not offer him enough airtime to deal with the issues presented on the show – a common complaint from rival politicians

The other media

As for the Hezbollah Al-Manar TV station, one official at the station who asked to remain anonymous told MENASSAT that Al-Manar respected all Lebanese opinions, but added that the station was keen on "not poisoning the audience" with false information.

Another source at Al-Manar said, "We admit we are a partisan station at large, thus we pick our guests carefully, according to our strategy." But he denied any assertions that pro-March 14 guests had excused themselves from

appearing on the channel's shows.

Sarkis Duehi, a March 14 Maronite candidate contending for a seat in the Zgharta District in northern Lebanon accepted an invitation to appear on Al-Manar TV in May.

"They asked me questions about campaign funding and pushed me to discuss my expenses," he said.

Duehi accused Al-Manar of misleading the discussion after the Al-Manar journalist revealed that he had obtained a "fake check" issued by Duehi.

"It was his goal to create a stark contradiction between what I said, and what he thought he had in the way of incriminating evidence."

Duehi says had he been told up front - at the beginning of the program - he would have revealed that the "fake check" in question had been forged by someone impersonating the politician. "But the Al-Manar host opted to play a dirty game in order to sensationalize the 'non-event.'"

Murr Television (MTV), a private channel owned by March 14th political hopeful Gabriel Murr, was re-opened 2 months before elections as an openly pro-government TV station.

An assistant to MTV political talk show host Walid Abboud said Abboud hosted guests from every political sphere in the run-up to the election. "They were often surprised when Walid asked questions that conflicted with the March 14 party line - playing devils advocate if you will."

The young assistant added that failing to provide guests from the "other side" of the political divide, "Is a failure to the station itself because the audience expects to hear both arguments, all audiences without exception, in fact, the viewers love to hear how the two guests and the two arguments will interact."

Despite this belief in the absolute necessity of presenting opposing guests, there was a recent row between two candidates running for the parliament in which MTV host Abboud was accused of favoring a March 14 politician running for the Maronite Christian seat in Beirut's First electoral district.

Politicians boycott

Politicians themselves have had official and unofficial boycott policies for TV networks and individual presenters because of their affiliations with political parties.

Assassinated Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri always refused to be on talks shows hosted by Magi Farah, who is aligned with the Christian government opposition.

Farah currently works with FPM-funded OTV, and pro-March 14 Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader MP Walid Jumblatt (Druze leader) has reportedly refused to appear on any OTV program.

Although Jumblatt refused to comment on the subject publicly, media spokesman for the PSP, Rami al-Rayyis told MENASSAT, "This question about his refusal to appear on OTV is fairly raised. But first we'd have to be talking about real media, and I for one don't blame Jumblatt for his refusal to appear on OTV."

Al-Rayyis himself appeared on an OTV talk show with journalist George Yasmin and accused him of dominating what was meant to be a two-way discussion.

"He brought up some very sensitive issues about the civil war and began asking leading questions about sectarian issues in Lebanon - they were very inciting comments, and I advised my (PSP) comrades to think twice before appearing on OTV."

Lebanese Forces MP George Adwan says he does not feel comfortable giving statements to unknown journalists. "I simply don't trust that journalists will spin my words in a fair manner, and if I'm misquoted, any clarifications added later do not do much."

On the other hand, a Sunni candidate in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli, Khaldoun Sharif said he has accepted invitations for interviews from a wide-range of media outlets.

"It's logical to take all comers," Sharif said, adding, "A clever politician knows how to benefit from media appearances, and can expose a journalist's prejudice when doing so."

What is clear given the fact that Lebanon's media hasn't undergone any serious reform during this election process - the post election coverage is likely to be equally biased - drawing out the partisan media war reflected in the greater political reality of Lebanon.

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