

Sfeir voices support for reinstating compulsory military service

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BEIRUT: The Maronite patriarch voiced support Thursday for reinstating compulsory military service following his call for seeing more Christians in the armed forces. Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir made the remarks during a meeting with a delegation of the Journalist's Union, headed by Melhem Karam.

Sfeir was also asked about the latest tug-of-war over abolishing sectarianism in politics, following Speaker Nabih Berri's call to begin the process according to the Constitution. "We haven't been in touch with the speaker for a long time," Sfeir said when asked about the timing of Berri's call to form a committee tasked with abolishing political sectarianism.

Sfeir also lent his support to instituting administrative decentralization, saying it would allow people to process government facilities locally, rather than making the trek to government offices in the capital or major cities.

Asked about claims that administrative decentralization would lead to a federal system of government, Sfeir said that "if federalism means that each religious sect forms a separate entity, then it will be difficult to achieve."

On the issue of making appointments to vacant state positions, which is before the cabinet, Sfeir called for selecting qualified individuals to the right positions, while urging Christians to take part in state institutions, since all Lebanese should be able to participate equally in rights and responsibilities.

"Lebanon is for all its citizens and it has 18 religious sects that should take part in all administrations or army positions," Sfeir said.

Sfeir recently highlighted the need for Christians to enlist in the Lebanese Army, since the community's share of personnel has declined in recent years.

Sfeir also voiced support for the restoration of compulsory military service for a six month or one year period, adding that "it's a national duty."

Tackling the ongoing debate over whether to postpone municipal elections, scheduled for the spring, Sfeir said "certain amendments might need to be implemented first."

Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud said on Thursday his ministry was ready to hold the elections on time, but added that the final decision lay with the Cabinet.

Sfeir said that he hadn't received an invitation from Damascus to visit Syria to take part in the annual mass for Saint Maroun next month.

"We will look in to it, if an invitation is sent," Sfeir said.

Sfeir also met with Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs **Michel Pharaon** and with Premier Saad Hariri's advisor for foreign affairs, Mohammad Chatah.

Following the meeting, Pharaon said appointments to the bureaucracy by the Cabinet should be subject to certain standards and transparency, while Chatah said he discussed with Sfeir Hariri's recent visits to Jordan and Turkey.