

EDITORIAL

A culture of utter state neglect

Once in a while, a story comes along that both delights and disheartens. This week, an inmate serving an 18-year sentence for murder at the notoriously overcrowded Roumieh Prison was able to earn a degree in international relations and history from his cell. The lack of institutional programs to achieve such a feat meant that this man enlisted the help of a local NGO, the Association of Justice and Mercy (AJEM), together with Saint Joseph University (USJ), which awarded the degree.

That these institutions went to such lengths to help this person to reform is commendable, but the absence of the Lebanese government in this arena is surely a matter of concern.

Worryingly, it is not just our prisons where the government is conspicuously absent. A culture of neglect permeates our country's political establishment in numerous other, less controversial, areas than criminal reform. The victims of this neglect can be found in all the places where a government is supposed to be active, such as our schools and hospitals. The growing number of casualties on our roads is but one in a long list of symptoms of a general disregard for the wellbeing of the population. Instead of performing their duty in diffusing tensions, and thus limiting the likelihood of violence in the streets, our politicians actively encourage and engage in ratcheting up the pressure, the end result of such a path this country knows too well.

Issues such as health care, education, justice, and even the safety of Lebanese citizens all take a backseat while the same tired arguments are played out every night on the news. To have an idea of the priorities of the political class, one needs only look at the amount of time our politicians spend denouncing rival parties in comparison to the time spent talking about these issues.

Yet despite this neglect, the citizens of this country are continually finding ways to provide for themselves. It is an admirable trait of the Lebanese people, and a damning indictment of the politicians, that so many organizations exist to fill the gap where government should be. The people behind organizations like AJEM – noble though their cause may be – are providing services that are the responsibility of the state.

It is this ingenuity, initiative and compassion coming from ordinary citizens which we will be forced to rely on for the foreseeable future. We can only hope that those in whom we put our trust to represent us might one day stop bickering for long enough to learn from the people they serve. Perhaps then this country will get the leaders it deserves.

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