

The status of Palestinian women in political parties

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Introduction:

Over the past two decades, Palestinian women have suffered a tangible setback in their political role in the Palestinian arena. This is in spite of their significant role in the resistance during the first Intifada. Palestinian women played a major role at the popular grassroots level. Therefore, it has become necessary to review their role in society, first and foremost with regards to political factions. It is also necessary to create a political and social framework through which practical steps can be made in order for women to take their natural place in political decision-making places.

MIFTAH's program targets young women leaders and is aimed at building their capacities in dialogue, debate and general political knowledge; it also seeks to provide opportunities for them to become involved in leadership positions. Through this program it became apparent that there was a lack of political knowledge among women. This reflected on the retreat in women's roles inside political factions.

Discussion:

Setback at the cultural and political level

A number of factors contributed to the limitations on the role of women in Palestinian society and their failure to reach decision-making positions. Most significantly is the lack of young men and women participating in political factions. This is due to the frustration felt in young women's circles, as they noticed a setback in the ideological mentality of factions, especially leftist ones. This resulted in the absence of any role for the elite at the popular level. In contrast were the Islamic factions such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which did find a popular basis. This explained their acceptance in much of society, something which was directly translated into election results.

It is clear that there is a lack of overall political knowledge among youths. Responsibility for this lies with civil society and political factions in addition to the individual responsibilities of the youths themselves. Therefore, it is imperative to find a way out of this muddled political

and intellectual state and lack of information and knowledge, so we can confront the religious and fundamental practices and trends emerging in society and touch base with the more modern, contemporary issues of today. This will all bridge the intellectual gap between leaders and youths at the grassroots base.

In light of this setback, political factions are required to assume their role in raising awareness and preparing leaders in society. In the same context, officials and civil society must wage a battle to change school curricula. Likewise, the educational process in schools must be monitored in order to control the deterioration in culture and awareness occurring in Palestinian society.

Tools in the hands of the factions, and the national “laboratory”

The fact that political action is limited to leaders, far removed from the practical participation of young men and women, has contributed to the youth sector’s absence in the factions. Furthermore, factions did not develop tools and mechanisms that would help them tackle the requirements of various political stages. They also lost channels of communication with the youth sector in addition to the fact that political bodies, including women’s parties, are isolated from one another and have not developed one line of thinking. Women are physically present but their participation is far removed from decision-making positions at the political level, with the exception of a few cases.

At a time when the role of women was limited to small committees within the factions, males were competing over political leadership positions in the PLC and other forums. As a result of this, women’s participation suffered a setback, leaving her no space except in the context of the quota system. Hence, women were a minority in representation in spite of their broad presence on the ground. This prompted an urgent need to empower women in decision-making positions and a need to revive the role played by factions in creating women leaders and promoting their right to run and reach leadership positions.

The status of women in political factions reflects the deteriorating state of these political factions; factions have been engrossed in their internal problems, with the role of most of their leaders shifting from mobilization of the masses to institutional work. Hence, neither the faction nor the goal remained unified, something which created a state of chaos where women and youths were the victims since they are the weakest link. This meant a collective discourse was needed for political factions and for empowering women at three levels: self-empowerment that would enable them to make decisions; social empowerment; and empowerment to enable them to reach higher positions.

At the popular level, there have been youth initiatives for national action and for resisting the occupation such as the Bab Al Shams, Bab Al Karamah and Manateer initiatives, which should be promoted in the future. The factions and all political forces should support these popular initiatives and highlight the role of youth and women through them.

Recommendations:

1. The need to formulate a specific conceptual framework in order to revive the role played by factions in creating women leaders in decision-making positions.
2. Political factions need to create channels of communication with youths, embrace them and provide them with the space to carry out their role, through developing tools and mechanisms in a way that will go hand in hand with the current situation.
3. Unifying Palestinian discourse far from the confusion, which has affected all aspects of Palestinian life; pointing the compass in the right direction, out of the confusion in which the Palestinian people live.
4. Reviving the “national laboratory” as a space where youths can take on their natural role as active and effective members of society.
5. There must be a return to the masses and a revival of all forces in order to bridge the gap between leaders and the political elite in factions, and youths at the popular grassroots level.