

Promoting political participation of women and youths in local councils

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Introduction:

This paper is a follow up to the results of the Fifth National Gathering of women leaders and local council members held by MIFTAH on November 14, 2013 and the session held on March 5, 2014 between local council members and political activists from all national factions in the various Palestinian areas and between central political and faction leaders.

The two sessions were aimed at promoting political participation among women and youth, namely in local councils by opening this dialogue among local and central political and faction leaders. A meeting was also held with PLC member and legal experts in the president's office and the cabinet in April, 2014.

The participants in the two meetings discussed the promotion of political participation of these two sectors, namely in local councils, in terms of increasing positive intervention for women to 30% of the seats instead of 20%. They also discussed lowering the age of candidacy in local councils to 21 instead of 25 and lowered the threshold in local elections to 5% instead of 8%.

The paper aims at shedding light on the importance of positive intervention in changing women's status in the public sphere and in local councils in particular in a bid to achieve equality among all citizens and eliminate discrimination on a gender basis.

Palestinian women's participation in decision-making positions in the PA remains low. Official statistics provided by the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics say the number of women in

senior administrative positions is still low both in public office, the diplomatic corps or the justice system not to mention political leadership bodies.

Women's status in local councils

The results of local elections, whether those held in 2004-2005 or in 2012-2013 point to the fact that it is still difficult for women to win seats in local councils. The results also show that the possibility to increase their numbers up from the minimum ceiling granted by the local council law of 2004 is impossible whether elections are according to majority rule or proportional representation.

In the 2004 and 2005 elections, the women's quota contributed to the increase of women gaining local council seats by around 17% of the overall seats. Women won 11% of the seats in the first and second phases without depending on the quota, with the quota raising the percentage of seats for women by 6% to 7% in the first and second phases respectively. In the third and fourth phases, they won 11% and 6% without depending on the quota with the quota raising women's seats to and 15% and 9% respectively. As for the 2012 and 2013 general elections, women won 739 of the overall 3,505 seats in local councils, or 21%.

It is clear that positive intervention in favor of women is necessary as a way of promoting their status in local councils and which calls for more efforts to improve women's participation in representative bodies until equality is reached between men and women in Palestine.

Furthermore, much of the responsibility lies on the shoulders of political parties and factions in making this change through intervention and lobbying among legislators so as to transform these demands into laws able to raise the status of women in elected councils, particularly local councils. This contributes to making changes in the social and cultural structures of communities in terms of promoting women's participation in public life and in political decision making.

Youth in local councils

Youths (20-29 age group) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip comprise 17.7% of the total population, according to PCBS estimations in mid-July 2013,¹ with the 19 and under age group comprising more than 52% of the overall population. Youths registered with the Central Elections Committee between 18 and 30 years of age constituted around 42% of the overall number of registered voters.

Furthermore, 821 youths in the 25-35 age group won seats in local councils from an overall 3,505 seats, or 23%.

¹¹¹ http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/_PCBS/Downloads/book2025.pdf2

Various viewpoints indicate that lowering the candidacy age from 25 to 21 will give the opportunity for more youth participation, especially university students in various communities on the one hand, and also contribute to shaping their personalities and developing their potentials and expertise on the other. This is because local bodies are considered a venue for shaping and molding these potentials and producing political leaders with a deep understanding for citizens' needs and who are able to contribute to public life.

Lowering the threshold

The threshold is the number of votes needed for electoral lists to become part of the race and win seats in local councils. The lower the threshold is, the more parties and smaller lists have a chance to enter into local councils, thus creating more plurality within the councils on the one hand, and more representation of community sectors on the other. It also contributes to creating a culture of dialogue within local councils in general.

Proposals were made in both the National Gathering sponsored by MIFTAH and in CEC workshops for party and civil society representatives, calling for lowering the threshold in local council elections from 8% to 5%.

In spite of objections to changing the threshold percentage among some who said it would not impact the results of smaller local council elections, still, the possibility for expanding participation in local decision making and opening doors to factions and small coalitions within the larger local councils and municipalities, is enough reason to amend the law and lower the threshold. This is because local councils are considered a primary meeting point for creating opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between the various political parties and for providing expertise to young political leaders.

Promoting the participation of women and youth will not be realized until Palestinian parties and factions assume a leading role in social liberation according to their progressive ideologies on the one hand and breaking free of electoral alliances with narrow interests aimed at winning a seat here and there, on the other. This is in addition to the need for united action in developing frameworks that guarantee the improvement of women and youth's statuses in national action and in political decision making. The fact remains that there will be no social advancement without clearly and actively addressing the status of Palestinian women in society and state institutions, first and foremost local councils. *Towards this goal, the following could be implemented:*

- (1) Intensive work by political parties "national action factions" to promote and develop fair participation of women in local councils -- town and village councils - through raising the women's quota to at least 10%.
- (2) Lobbying towards lowering the age of candidacy for youth from 25 to 21.
- (3) Adopting the presentation of an amended local council elections draft law to be presented to Palestinian legislators and which includes the following: a) boosting the percentage of

positive intervention for women to 30% of the overall local council seats; b) lowering the candidacy age in local elections to 21; c) lowering the threshold from 8% to 5%.

- (4) Committing to reviving the charter for women's participation in political decision making, which PLO factions signed in 2010.
- (5) Increasing the number of women in local council electoral lists in accordance with the law and guaranteeing that women are placed in top positions in candidate lists in order to guarantee increased chances for their success, such as having a woman among the first three names of the list.
- (6) Committing to developing a mechanism for choosing men and women to run in local council elections in a way that would allow singling out candidates capable of taking on roles and duties in the local councils and within a timeframe that would allow candidates to develop their capabilities and acquire skills to prepare themselves for their future roles.
- (7) Mobilizing party bases to promote women's participation and support their candidacy in party lists without being pressured by the social legacy against women's participation. There is a need to change the cultural structure of communities and halt the tendency to enter into narrow alliances with tribal 'forces' in order to win more votes in exchange for prejudice towards or the hindering of any increase in women's participation in local councils. Examples of this would be delaying the process of putting women in electoral lists to minimize the chances of them winning, or maintaining the minimum number of women participants allowed in the local elections law.
- (8) Creating opportunities for the empowerment of faction and party members intellectually, politically and in women's issues in order to develop their skills and performance in national and political action.
- (9) Party and faction leaders must give ample attention to educating the people, considering this as a tool for communication with local leaders and faction bases and which also promotes the capabilities of young leaders in the various locations.
- (10) Providing the necessary training by civil society organizations to boost candidates' potentials given that these organizations have the most experience and are able to provide women candidates with the necessary skills to assume an active role
- (11) Working with political factions and civil society organizations to create a broad alliance to put pressure on the government and the presidency in order to expedite the issuance of the amended local council elections law.
- (12) Presenting the draft proposals prepared in coordination with the CEC to members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.
- (13) Pressuring the Cabinet to speed up inclusion of the amended draft law to the local council elections law in order to speed up its issuance by the Palestinian President, in accordance with stipulations of Article 43 of the Basic Law.