



Bayan بیان ביאן

The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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From the Editors' Desk

The current issue of *Bayan* is being published about a month after the curtain fell on the 2018 municipal election campaign. The issue includes one essay by Arik Rudnitzky, which surveys prominent phenomena characterizing the local elections as experienced in Israel's Arab communities. It is an adaptation of an opening lecture delivered at a conference held by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation on November 14, 2018.

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The Editors

Arik Rudnitzky* / The 2018 Municipal Elections in Arab Localities: an Overview

Elections in Arab localities in Israel were concluded on November 13, 2018, following a second round in some municipalities. This essay presents a general summary of the main political phenomena that characterized the elections in Arab localities.¹ These observations are based on a variety of sources including news articles published in Arab media in Israel, radio interviews, and conversations with Arab political activists.

Political Violence and a Lack of Democratic Culture

In general, while there has been an atmosphere of quiet respect between candidates for local authority head and their respective political camps, the election season was marked by the rekindling of local political rivalries, some which even turned violent. One particularly salient example occurred in Kufr Manda, where the days preceding the election were accompanied by street fighting (including the use of fireworks) between competing political factions. Violent events were also reported in Sakhnin on the day after the election, following the defeat of incumbent mayor Mazen Ganayim to Hadash party member Dr. Sawfat Abu Raya. Groups of young people, apparently Ganayim supporters, refused to accept the voters' judgment. In a paroxysm of political frustration they took to the streets, destroying property and causing other provocations.

These examples are indicative of the way that violence has become one of the most significant phenomena in Arab society today. In a survey conducted in the summer of 2017 by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 23% of Arab respondents named violence, organized crime and lack of personal security as their most acute concerns – even more than racism (21%), the economy and employment (16%), or the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (10%).² Such insecurity is exacerbated during municipal election cycles, when the atmosphere is more politically charged. While Knesset election cycles are not characterized by violence, because political confrontations do not take place in the immediate environment of Arab citizens, the outcomes of local municipal elections are perceived as immediately significant contests with the power to directly shape the reality of community life. Hence the path from political rivalry to violence grows shorter. It seems that when the fate of the community is at stake, “street culture” takes precedence over democratic culture.

Indeed, the absence of democratic culture and the increase of politically-charged violence preoccupied the Arab media in the lead-up to the recent elections. Radio interviews with academic experts, with heads of local reconciliation committees, with clergy members and with ordinary citizens, dealt largely with the phenomena of

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¹ Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues, *2018 Local Elections – Preliminary Results in Arab Society* (November 2, 2018): <http://www.iataskforce.org/activities/view/805>

² Itamar Radaï and Arik Rudnitzky, “Citizenship, Identity and Political Participation: Measuring the Attitudes of the Arab Citizens in Israel,” *Bayan: The Arabs in Israel*, 12 (December 2017).

violence that accompanies each election cycle. This general mood was reflected by statements such as “These people do not understand democracy” and “The elections are like a complicated game falling into the hands of a small child, who completely destroys it.”

Decline of Parties, Rise of the Professional Municipal Head

The recent elections marked an important benchmark in the weakening of political parties and movements in the municipal arena. The Arab-Jewish Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE, *Hadash* in Hebrew) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA, *Balad* in Hebrew) parties, as well as the Islamic Movement, are three prominent political bodies active in national elections for the Knesset. However, it appears that the local arena operates according to its own rules. In the majority of local municipalities, the elected heads did not identify with any of these organizations. Even in communities where the elected municipal head was a member of a political party, like in Sakhnin, Deir Hanna and Arabeh, where Hadash-affiliated mayors were elected, such affiliation seemed to be merely nominal. While the Islamic Movement did indeed maintain control of three communities (Kufr Qasm in the Triangle and Rahat and Hura in the Negev), Umm al-Fahm, which has been considered an Islamic Movement stronghold since 1989, elected Dr. Samir Sobhi Jabareen, an independent candidate that won the support of Hadash and Balad, as mayor. Jabareen defeated Khalid Hamdan Agbaryah, a former Islamic Movement member who ran in this election (and indeed all those held since 2013) as an independent candidate.

The general impression among the Arab public is that the political parties have lost their power; the municipal discourse now deals less with national political issues that occupy the Arab public as a whole and focuses instead on matters that specifically concern local community members. This reflects, to a large extent, the priorities of the Arab voters themselves. While some voters did indeed ask to hear the broader worldview and political vision of the candidates, according to most news items the typical Arab voter most wanted to see their council head as an almost technocratic figure who would carry out work in the field, manage the council and its budget properly, deliver services to the citizens and improve the overall quality of life of the community.

It may be possible to identify a new archetype for Arab municipal heads. He or she is professionally trained (in business administration, engineering, law, and the like), or is a public activist who has demonstrated social involvement and who is not identified with a particular party and isn't backed by a specific family or clan. Some examples include Ali Salam, who won reelection in Nazareth with 65% of the vote, defeating his Hadash and Balad-backed opponent, Walid Afifi, by a substantial margin. According to some commentators, Salam won precisely because of his ability to connect with the “common people” more successfully than his opponent.³ In Shfar'am, Ursan Yassin was elected as mayor for the third time since 1998. Significantly, the fact that Yassin identifies politically with a Zionist party (the right-wing Likud Party, no less) was no obstacle to his reelection. An interesting case came to pass in the Bedouin city of Tel Sheva in the Negev: 30-year-old Omar Abu Rukeik

³ Amir Fakhoury, “In the Nazareth Elections, ‘The Orientals’ Defeat the ‘Ashkenazy’”. [Sicha Mekomit](#), November 1, 2018 [Hebrew]; Rami Mansour, “Honor and Services” [arab48.com](#), November 3, 2018 [Arabic].

– a registered nurse at Be'er Sheva's Soroka Hospital, with public sector experience working with at-risk Bedouin youth – was elected as head of the local council. Subsequently, Abu Rukeik commented, "Until today, there had never been a council head of Tel Sheva with an academic degree – they had always been elected according to their family affiliations. People wanted a new way of thinking."⁴

Arab Women: Political Power on the Rise?

In the 2018 election cycle, the number of female candidates for municipal councils rose in comparison with the 2013 cycle, and the number of women actually elected nearly doubled. In Kufr Kara, there was even a female candidate, Victoria Zahalka, for head of the local council, though she did not win. All in all, 24 Arab women were elected to serve as council members; 18 were elected directly and 6 were appointed according to rotation agreements. In Nazareth alone, three women were elected to the city council.⁵ Still, at only 3 percent the representation of Arab women at the municipal level is very low, especially in contrast to the general representation of women in local councils at the national level (16.6 percent), and the recent election of 11 Jewish women as local authority heads. This last phenomenon is significant enough to have been labelled by some as the "Feminine Wave" in the last local election cycle, itself called the "October Revolution."⁶

Nevertheless, on the Arab street, there is a new female spirit that is not immediately made obvious by the dry statistics alone. Until a decade ago, the archetypical Arab woman who would run in local elections was party-affiliated (usually Hadash), in her thirties or forties, and married with children. Today, this archetype is entirely changed. Female candidates do not identify with any political party, and it is hard to point to a single social profile that constitutes "The Female Arab Politician" – she can be single, married, divorced or a widow, with or without academic education. Here, we have a wide range of women from their twenties to their sixties who do not hesitate to enter into the ostensibly "male" political arena. Their motivation is to promote improvements to existing social frameworks, most of which are still clan-based.⁷

One of the catalysts of this change were the events of the "Arab Spring." Women and young people, mostly in Egypt and Tunisia, played a prominent role in the wave of

⁴ Hassan Shaalan, "The New Council Head – 30-Years-Old and a Registered Nurse." Ynet.co.il, November 7, 2018 [Hebrew].

⁵ "18 Women Succeed in Local Arab Regional Councils," arab48.com, November 2, 2018 [Arabic]. On the national level, no fewer than 72 Arab and Jewish women submitted their candidacy for the head of local councils in the last local elections (8.4% out of 856 candidates for this position). See: Amir Alon, "A Female Minority, 82-year-old Candidates: the Data in Advance of the Local Elections," Ynet.co.il, October 14, 2018 [Hebrew].; Amir Alon, Atila Shompalvi and Alexandra Lokash, "Record Number of Female Candidates in Local Elections," Ynet.co.il, October 4, 2018 [Hebrew].

⁶ Lee Yaron, "The Number of Women Heads of Local Councils Has Doubled, But They Are Still a Negligible Minority." Haaretz.co.il, November 1, 2018 [Hebrew]; Amir Alon, "Achievement in Local Elections: Another 100 Women in Local Councils," Ynet.co.il, November 9, 2018 [Hebrew].

⁷ Somou Younes, "Local Elections and Change in Arab Society," Ynet.co.il, November 15, 2018 [Hebrew]; Rana Zaher, "Arab-Palestinian Women in Local Israeli Government: Stereotypes Versus Reality," Lecture given at a conference on Local Politics and Municipal Elections in Arab Localities in Israel, held at Tel Aviv University on November 14, 2018 by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation.

mass protests. Changes in the self-perception of Arab women in Israel occurred alongside the changes in the broader region. The events that have taken place in the surrounding Arab arena, such as the liberalization of restrictions placed on women in Saudi Arabia or the recent rise of the possibility that there could one day be a female president of Tunisia (especially under the Islamic-oriented Al-Nahda party)⁸, have great influence on Arab society in Israel. In other words, Arab women in Israel are influenced by women in the greater Arab arena. They cannot help but to bring this influence into the local political arena.

Conclusion

Clan structure is the axiom upon which local social structure is built, and as such, it continues to play a central role in local elections in Arab communities. In some places, political polarization has been created clan rivalries that have led to acts of violence. At the same time, new phenomena must be noted: educated young people and women are rising up and staking their claim to local politics, even if they do not belong to notable families. In the town of Reina, for example, *al-Hirak al-Shababi* ("The Youth Movement") managed to win one seat in the local council. This might be one of the first cases in Arab society in which an amorphous and non-institutionalized movement of activists translated the support they receive from social networks into real political representation. These changes, even if they are not dramatic or immediate, are another indication of the processes of social change taking place in Arab society in Israel.

⁸ Salah al-Din al-Jurshi, "A Women President for Tunisia", arab48.com, October 30, 2018 [Arabic].