

Let's talk about Gaza

An Interview on Running for Elections as a Leftist Woman in Gaza

September 2016

Amal Khaled Abu Sbitan calls herself a normal Palestinian woman. Yet, raising three children as a single mother, managing a shop that provides enough income for her family and running as a candidate for the municipal elections is beyond normal. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to Amal about her decision to become a candidate for the Democratic Alliance List, her aims of creating a more equal society and her daily struggles as a woman with great ambitions in a male-dominated environment.¹

Why did you decide to run for the municipal elections?

My aim is to support those women that are suffering from neglect and marginalization, as they aren't granted their rights as humans and women. The municipality doesn't look after them or target them in its projects. Especially women with disabilities and special needs are overlooked. Gender is not a criterion for public institutions when it comes to planning policies and projects.

This is why you decided to run for the elections?

Yes. This was one reason. Another one was the fact that when we address the municipality, it is impossible to find the female members we elected in 2005 because the government in Gaza has replaced them. When we address the municipality's manager or chief, they usually look down on us and don't pay any attention to our inquiries and demands.



What do you think you have to offer in order to achieve the kind of change you are envisioning?

First, if there are more women in the municipality council, we can encourage women in our society to participate in politics and decision-making and to advocate their rights. The absence of women from places where decisions are made has resulted in marginalizing women in a lot of laws concerning women's rights, children's rights, inheritance and maternity. This is happening in both the West Bank

¹ The interview was conducted before the Palestinian Supreme Court decided to postpone the municipal elections until further notice. Read more: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/palestinian-court-suspends-local-elections-160908084522573.html>

and the Gaza Strip. That's why we want to start the change from the bottom, meaning local bodies finally reaching to larger bodies on the national level.

Why did you become a candidate for the Democratic Alliance List?

First, I believe that this list respects marginalized and underprivileged women, supports their rights and addresses women's needs in their program. This list never neglected us and is always interested and supportive about our ambitions. This list made us visible. We are three women in the list, numbered 2, 5 and 8. They even listed three women instead of just two as set by the guidelines.

What kind of difficulties and barriers did you face when you decided to run for elections on this list?

First of all, I didn't receive enough encouragement at the beginning. People wondered how I would face those big names on lists like Fatah and Hamas. How would I get into a place that enables me to achieve change while having this huge competition? Second, in the beginning at the registration stage, I faced the problem of financial clearance. They said that I should pay all my family's bills while I'm actually living in an independent household. Run by Hamas, the municipality put so many barriers for me in order to make me stop running for the elections. I also faced a problem in the sequence numbers. My name was replaced by a man's name on the list. He was from a big political party but this was actually based on political differences and not due to the gender conflict. However, I withdrew two hours before the registration deadline. Yet, they couldn't close the registration window without me, so they had to put my name back on the list. At the end, I agreed to come back so I got what I wanted.

How do you see the future of this election?

In general, the situation is not going well. It might get more difficult to actually realize the elections. I'm afraid that they will be canceled. However, I would prefer them to be canceled than experiencing violations and lack of transparency.

How many votes do you expect the Democratic Alliance to gain?

As from what we expect, I feel that there is a tone of desperation and frustration towards political parties in general. This gives people a pulse of the need to change. And this is what provides us with motivation and the hope of success. People's wish for change is what keeps us going. I would guess at least 30 or 40 per cent.

What are your fears?

I am afraid of violence and oppression in the process of voting. I fear that people's freedom to vote is violated by the personal interests of political parties.

What are your hopes?

I hope for female candidates to reach the highest positions possible, which means maybe to even run for presidency. The president's position is not only for men. I myself find difficulty in dealing and comprehending the laws in my country. I would love those laws to change and to actually provide better lives for everyone: men, women, children, workers, people with disabilities and so on. My hope is to see laws getting implemented that create justice and equality.