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Modest but Powerful Activism for Palestinian-Origin Jordanian Rights

By: Oraib Rantawi, Oroub el-Abed · October, 2012

The Arab uprisings have created a unique opportunity for Palestinian-origin Jordanians to address head-on the hitherto taboo topic of the increasingly dire situation faced by the millions-strong community in Jordan. Since March 2011, several new activist groups (*Herakat*), including some Palestinian origin-Jordanians who were or still are in positions of power, have been calling for equal rights for all Jordanian citizens and insisting that Palestinian origin should not deprive Jordanian citizens of their rights in and obligations to their country, Jordan.

Most recently, a group of Palestinian-origin Jordanian elites wrote to King Abdullah II in a courteous but pointed manner to protest the State's marginalization policies against the community in such areas as education, the electoral law, public appointments, and nationality rights. The letter is the first-ever move of its kind. It was signed by the Jordanian Initiative for Equal Citizenship and those Arabic-language news outlets that published it described the signatories as political and intellectual leaders, statesmen and decision-makers, civil society activists, and media figures. The drafters warned that the politics of marginalization that could open the way for terrorists to infiltrate and co-opt those in marginalized communities.

They noted that the state's explicit and hidden discrimination policies run counter

to the King's own instructions, and, furthermore, result in fractured citizenship and loyalties between the privileged who enjoyed access to higher education, public sector employment and other rights, and those who do not. They strongly affirmed that, while seeking their basic rights, Palestinian-origin Jordanians were committed to fulfilling the Palestinian right of return and Palestinian rights in their original homeland, and that they rejected the notion that "Jordan is Palestine" (a mantra of the Israeli right.)

In addition to the Jordanian Initiative for Equal Citizenship, other groupings include Citizenship and Return, the Right of Return Group, and the Movement for Equal Citizenship. Their members include former officials, politicians, intellectuals, writers and journalists, lawyers, and syndicate members. Pressure groups have also been formed amongst members of Parliament to lobby for equal rights and fair shares for Palestinian-origin people in the electoral process.

Palestinian-origin Jordanians used to be perceived as passive and disinterested in Jordanian local politics. However, the new political groupings demonstrate the growing change and activism among this community, after a long period of withdrawal as a response to the erosion of their rights. Moreover, as part of Jordan's burgeoning "Arab spring," people from different social classes have formed political movements and small political parties that call for equal rights for all the citizens in Jordan regardless of the origin.

One of the major problems facing Palestinian-origin Jordanians is marginalization in electoral processes. The 1989 electoral law, which ushered in democratic elections and a proportional system of representation, was changed in 1993 to a one-person one-vote system that was seen as designed to favour traditional elites and tribal candidates, who also benefited because of the way electoral districts were drawn.

Over the years, promises to amend the law did not bear fruit. In the wake of the

turmoil generated in Jordan by the Arab uprisings the King called for an extraordinary session of parliament to amend the law in a way that would ensure wider public participation. However, the changes were seen as a move to limit the power of Islamists and other opposition forces as well as Palestinian-origin Jordanian candidates, and did not placate the protests.

It will be recalled that the 1989 electoral law brought in strong Islamist representation, with over a quarter of the seats, then numbering 80, taken by the Muslim Brotherhood. These deputies lobbied strongly against the 1991 Madrid peace conference with Israel and also spoke out against the unjust treatment to Palestinian-origin people in Jordan.[1] For a few years, the Palestinian voice was represented by the Islamists who were perceived as having a Palestinian bias.

Against this background, the new Palestinian-origin social and political movements, which represent liberal ideologies, have been trying to stake out a political space that is different to the Islamists and to emphasize the role the Palestinian-origin Jordanians can play as fully-fledged citizens.

The issue of access to education is as important as political participation for Palestinian-origin Jordanians, if not more so. According to a survey on higher education conducted by the Jordanian Initiative for Equal Citizenship in 2012, only 20% of candidates to Jordanian universities are selected based on their grades. The rest are selected based on a quota system that covers sectors such as the Royal Court, south and north desert areas, remote areas, underprivileged areas, and pockets of poverty in mostly rural areas. In all of these areas, there are few Palestinian-origin people.

The unequal access to higher education affects employment opportunities, especially in the public sector, and attendant rights such as social security and medical insurance. The impact is somewhat cushioned by remittances from the Gulf and the opportunities offered in the private sector, but it remains severe.

In fact, the slow withdrawal of Palestinian-origin Jordanians from the public sphere has been underway for decades as "Jordanization" policies began to be implemented.[2] While some Palestinian-origin Jordanians, mainly from notable Palestinian families, were able to sustain their privileges as part of the ruling elite, the majority has been marginalized.

Another major issue of concern, also addressed in the letter to the King, relates to the withdrawal of the passports of Palestinian-origin Jordanians and their replacement with travel documents. Since 2001, Jordanian immigration officers have had the power to do so at their discretion. This has been applied in particular to those who have the yellow crossing cards that permit them to travel between the West Bank and Jordan. In this way, the Jordanian authorities seek to force those of Palestinian origin to remain in what is left of mandate Palestine, a measure they claim is "well-intentioned" in that it prevents Israel from evacuating Palestinian land. Although numbers are not available regarding how many Palestinian-origin Jordanians have been affected, these moves have naturally further destabilized the community.

Amidst all these internal and external pressures, the Arab uprisings have given birth to a vivid voice filled with hope of change amongst Palestinian-origin Jordanians. This is creating a political voice that confirms their belief in their just Palestinian cause and in their rights, as refugees and as Palestinians, to return to their homes in Palestine, but at the same time affirms their right to act as Jordanian citizens and to claim their basic education, employment, social protection, health care and political participation in the public sphere like any other citizen of Jordanian origin.

Although this is still a nascent movement that faces many challenges, including negative reactions from Jordanian nationalists and oppression by the state security apparatus, the activist initiatives by Palestinian-origin Jordanians are a first step towards ending marginalization and establishing a new relationship with

the state – a relationship of mutual respect between the state and its citizens. The Palestinian-origin Jordanian initiatives fit into the broader context of the many attempts to foster open discussion amongst all members of Jordanian society so that each group can reflect the needs of its constituencies and have a respected, representative voice. This movement too is in its early days.

Taken together, these movements seek to preserve Jordanian national interest and identity and to stand firm against Zionist efforts to abolish Palestinian identity. The Jordanian state would do well to recognize that respect for political and citizenship rights is an effective way to create the solidarity needed to tackle crises. Otherwise the numerous social and economic issues that are exacerbated by rising prices will explode with results that no one can foresee.

1. *It should be noted that not all Palestinians residing in Jordan carry Jordanian nationality. For example, over 100,000 Palestinians from Gaza who reside in Jordan do not.*
2. *See Adnan Abu Odeh, Jordanians, Palestinians & the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999, and University of Michigan, 2008.*

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