

MERIA

Palestinian Women's Model Parliament+

By Dahlia Scheindlin*

The decision stunned even its leaders. During their model parliament held last April in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian women's rights activists first recommended that laws be enacted to restrain and regulate polygamy; that it be allowed only in exceptional cases and with the first wife being offered a divorce. But after the 126 "delegates" confirmed the vote, they dramatically invalidated the decision. Instead, a large majority called for a total ban on polygamy amid widespread applause.

The Islamic community called the vote a "slap in the face to the Koran," according to the Palestinian daily, "al-Ayyam." The activists were denounced as "devils, satans and demons," accused of desecrating and disrespecting the Shari'ah (Islamic law).

"Everyone was against us, and they were totally irrational and emotional. They feared that we were trying to undermine the whole religious court system, and simple religious people became truly scared," recalls Maha Abu Dayyeh Shamas, head of the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling based in Palestinian-populated East Jerusalem which organized the parliament.

The polygamy vote was a highlight of the "Palestinian Model Parliament: Women and Legislation," a two-day forum to demand civil rights and equality for Palestinian women held in both Gaza and the West Bank town of Ramallah. For 18 months, the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling prepared for the parliament

by holding forums in cities and refugee camps throughout the Palestinian Authority on the status of women.

Gaza has operated since 1954 under the law of Egypt, with the West Bank under Jordanian law since 1967. Legal regulations and customs are also heavily influenced by the Shari'ah. Under these laws, women are treated like second-class citizens.

"The parliament's goal was to change long-term attitudes that women aren't strong enough to decide anything, and that only their brothers or fathers can decide," said Murwa Kassem, the model parliament's Gaza coordinator. "We needed to start somewhere."

The delegates--equal numbers of women and men--included members of women's and non-governmental organizations who were picked by organizers based mainly on whether or not they were "outspoken and articulate," said Shamas. Members of Islamic fundamentalist groups were invited to participate as observers.

Whatever it accomplishes--and that remains debatable--the parliament in and of itself was a remarkable event. The majority of women in Gaza are traditional Muslims. Most wear headscarves, as did many at the mock parliament. The influence of Islamic fundamentalists was so strong here a few years ago that women who went out unveiled faced harassment. But Palestinian women have also long had an extensive organizational network and were active in the six-year intifada or uprising against

Israeli occupation. With the establishment of the quasi-independent Palestinian Authority four years ago after the Israel/Palestinian peace agreement, feminists succeeded in abolishing some sexist laws, including one requiring female drivers to be accompanied by a guardian.

Still Palestinian feminists are struggling to prioritize their goals: Should they fight exclusively for Palestinian statehood, in the hope that this will further their goals? Or should they be social critics, promoting long-term issues of democracy and women's rights as national institutions and a constitution are being formed? In 1988, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat proclaimed that "Palestine is a state...based on social justice, equality with no discrimination...on the basis of ethnicity, religion, color or between men and women." The mechanics of achieving such a vision were left undefined.

The Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling boldly opted for the role of social critic. "The Palestinian women's mock parliament has a role: to teach people how to give voice to democratic debate," said Kassem, an earnest, high-cheekboned woman with a BA in nursing and mental health, during an interview in her Gaza office with its staff of young, friendly and dynamic women and men.

The model parliament's agenda dealt exclusively with personal status, leaving aside labor, economic, and political inequalities in an attempt to defuse political differences. Gaza participants called for making the minimum age for marriage 18 for both women and men--under Egyptian law women can be married at age nine--and abolishing a law requiring women to get permission from a male relative to marry. They also collected 16,000 signatures for a social covenant calling for justice and equality between the sexes.

That's considerably more than the 170 imams (religious leaders) who signed a

petition against the parliament, and yet their sermons could be heard throughout the Palestinian Authority. They claimed that the participants were against family values, dividing society, introducing foreign elements and "collaborating," although with whom it is not clear.

On the second day of the Gaza meeting, an Islamic cleric who is a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, disrupted the proceedings to distribute a pamphlet that castigated the proceedings in the strongest language possible: "After al-Nakba [The "Catastrophe", referring to the establishment of Israel in 1948] of the land, comes the Nakba of religion and family purity," the pamphlet read, according to the Israeli newspaper "Haaretz."

In Ramallah, participants convened under police protection after an Islamic demonstration was called, although it was cancelled at the last minute. A motion by Ramallah delegates to lessen the punishment for female adultery--which can be capital punishment--was denounced as encouraging immoral behavior.

Model parliament organizers insist they are not against Islam.

"I believe that Islam has the capacity to make sense for our society," said Kassem. "All of our recommendations come from the Shari'ah. Our problem is not with religion, but with the politics of the religious: the leaders are against civil society." She furrows her brow and tries this point again, to ensure that she is understood.

"We are not against the Shari'ah. But even if we were, we have the right to talk and have a discussion among the people."

Some opposition against the parliament has decreased. Zuheir Al Daba'i, an official in the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Religious Affairs and a preacher, stated publicly that much of the hostile sentiment against the parliament was based on misrepresentation, and he ultimately came to support it.

"Eventually, the religious leaders began to call us. They wanted to hear directly what we were trying to do," says Shamas, "We are building a stronger political base, and a number of political parties have even distributed leaflets in support."

Most importantly, the parliament has government approval. In Ramallah, the area's governor himself attended the mock parliament's opening and conveyed Arafat's support of the event. Sessions of the parliament were broadcast on the government-controlled Palestinian television. Analysts believe such support is intended to counter the strength of Islamic fundamentalist movements who are critics of Arafat, as much as out of a belief in women's rights and equality.

Still, the women are hard-pressed to defend charges that their parliament will lead nowhere. Organizers plan to publish and distribute the decisions reached by the parliament, and to present some of the less controversial issues to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). But several of the official parliamentarians will likely be unsympathetic to a legislative competitor. (A Palestinian asked for the phone number of the model parliament, and a Gaza operator mistakenly gave the number for the PLC. When he called, an irate PLC receptionist snapped that it had no information whatsoever about some "women's parliament".) Moreover, the PLC is locked in its power struggle with Arafat, and much of its own legislation has not even been ratified.

Therefore, critics contend the model parliament as simply divisive and to no one's advantage. To what extent anyway, they add, were the Parliament's hottest issues, such as polygamy or child marriages a real problem? No more than four percent of men marry more than one woman; and only a very small percentage of girls were married below age 12 (although 46% of all

marriages in Gaza involve girls between 13 and 17). The women have thus been repeatedly attacked for gratuitous internal division for the sake of minimal social change.

But even if none of their actions became law, supporters say such a model parliament fosters long-term democracy via women's progress.

"These are basic concepts to other people: the right to an opinion, freedom to debate opinions, and the right to hold a public forum. Democracy has to become cultural, it has to start in the home. Otherwise, you can build all the structures and they won't help," states Shamas.

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