



# Jordan: Women and Politics

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With an expected call for parliamentary elections this fall, former women candidates look with mixed expectations at their chances of winning seats in the 80-member Lower House. "I am planning to run for the upcoming elections no matter what the outcome of the draft elections law was," stated Toujan Faisal, who in 1993 was the first and only woman to make it to the House. Faisal, who repeatedly charged that vote rigging in the 1997 elections caused her defeat to her opponent Nayef Mola for the Circassian seat in Amman's Third District, vowed to run this fall "even if I know that fraudulent activities will occur like last time." "I believe the vote rigging... in 1997 was a success, and it will be my success again if I run this time and they forge the elections so that I lose again," Faisal charged. She said fraud would only serve to strengthen her political standing. Critical of the parties and individuals who boycotted the 1997 elections as well as those who intend to sit out the coming elections if the Elections Law is not amended to their liking, Faisal said: "Everything that these parties and individuals are doing is a waste. The true work is for these strong parties to participate in elections and if they lose, they will prove that there was fraud in the elections."

But for former candidate and journalist Fardous Masri, "without amendments to the Election Law's one-person, one-vote system and other election regulations, there is no point in women contending seats in Parliament." "In my humble opinion, I do not believe that any woman will reach the Lower House under the current Elections Law because the law as it stands strengthens tribalism," she said. Election analysts have repeatedly criticized the one-person, one-vote system stating that it strengthens tribalism, does not insure demographic balance and limits voters to make one choice instead of voting for several candidates. Masri, one of 17 women who ran unsuccessfully in 1997, added that poten-

tial women candidates also find themselves hampered by the lack of financial resources. "Why should I waste my limited financial resources in running for elections that I know I will lose because of several factors?" Masri asked.

The last three elections [in 1989, 1993 and 1997] proved to be a major setback for women, with only one of the 32 women who ran during those years managing to clinch a seat. Analysts have attributed women's failure to the one-person, one-vote system, lack of financial resources, tribalism and imbedded cultural beliefs that sees no place for women in the political arena and still portrays women as housewives whose only job is to raise children and run their households. "One deputy from my own Fifth District assured me that there is no need for me to run because he has information from the government that no woman will win this time," Masri said.

For former Senator Na'ela Rashdan who went through the disappointing election experience back in 1989, discrimination was also embedded in the political parties. "The party was so surprised that I decided to run for elections and they thought I was joking, but when they sensed my seriousness, they decided to support another male member and told me to run on my own," Rashdan recalled. The party's attitude was not the only factor against her decision to enter political life a decade ago. She says women themselves were also a factor. "When I would ask women who would they vote for, they would tell me their husbands or their tribes did not decide yet who to vote for," she said. Rashdan, who will most likely refrain from running in the upcoming elections, stressed that the only solution for women to win in the upcoming elections was a "temporary quota." "Women need a temporary quota in order to convince people that they are capable of doing the job. Then, in the future,

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women will not need a quota and will be elected based on their performances under the dome," she explained.

Many candidates complained during the 1997 elections campaign, that their opponents collected many of the voting cards and distributed them to voters after offering them several incentives to vote for them. The incentives ranged from promising voters jobs, to university admission for their relatives, and sometimes, voters were obliged to vote after being invited to a "mansaf" by the candidates.

Others charged that several voting cards were distributed to the same person at different polling stations, that voting cards were issued to army personnel (military personnel are prohibited from voting in Jordan), votes were cast in the names of deceased individuals and bogus voting cards were issued. Communist Party member Emily Nafaa, who ran in 1997 in the Third District for the Christian seat, said she was undecided about running again. "My decision to run is a party decision, and it is too early now to decide, especially amid several reports that the elections might be postponed or that the mandate of the Lower House might be extended," Nafaa said. She added that she favors running because women's presence in Parliament is of "extreme importance." "We have been lobbying for better representation for women in the Lower House because there are many legislative issues that women need to tackle," Nafaa said. Nafaa was referring to efforts by women groups and activists calling for a better representation for women in the Parliament, mainly allocating a 20 per cent representation for both genders, which many described as a quota under a new name.

This demand caused a controversial debate in the media and meetings among supporters and opponents of the quota system in Jordan. Head of the Lower House Legal Committee Ghaleb Zu'bi, who agreed in principal that women should be present in the Lower House, objected to the 20 per cent demand, or quota, which he described as being "unconstitutional." "Women should not demand a quota because quotas are unconstitutional," Deputy Zu'bi told a television program recently. Currently there are quotas allocated for Bedouins (6 seats), Christians (9 seats) and Circassians (3 seats) in the Lower House. The lawmaker justified the presence of quotas in Parliament "because of historical and political reasons." He did not elaborate.

A second states man who met with women groups to listen to their demands emphasized the need to lobby the executive authority and the parties to ensure better representation in future elections. "Only then can we change the society's cultural mentality and support our society to give women a chance to participate positively in all sectors of life and not only the Parliament," said deputy and former Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament Saad Hayel Srour. Other deputies, however, have rejected the idea of women's repre-

sentation in the Lower House to start with. "Women cannot force themselves on a society that does not want them. They are still in the beginning of their march and should first prove themselves before they consider political representation," Deputy Mahmoud Kharabsheh of the Balqa District told women activists.

However, the most outrageous and derogatory comments were those of a deputy from the Amman Fourth District during a meeting with the press and Legal Committee to discuss the Election Law. "This is a man's job...women deputies will cause distraction to male deputies and stir trouble when male deputies instinctively looked at their breasts ... women could jeopardize their honor by going out late at night to take part in an "attwa or sulha" - social activities or Bedouin customs whereby a person plays as an intermediary or a middle man to bring two opposing sides together. If my daughter stayed out till late night I would shoot her myself."

Nafaa begs to differ stressing that "women's presence in Parliament is one form of democracy and openness to the outside world." "If I do not run for the elections, I am going to devote myself to question all the deputies who made promises and the ones who will make promises for women in their upcoming elections which they forget once they reach the House," Nafaa added.

Rashdan agreed stating: "We should start questioning all these deputies who are rejecting women's presence in Parliament, about the unfulfilled promises which they made during their election campaigns." Other demands, similar to those of the opposition parties, included canceling the one-person, one-vote system, increasing the numbers of seats in the Lower House to 120 and securing a demographic and geographic balance among the 21 electoral constituencies.

The demands were backed by a petition signed by over 15,000 individuals late last year, supporting women's representation in future parliaments, presented to the current Lower House for consideration. "The women's sector is determined to lobby for women's representation in the Lower House, and we are planning to focus on several highly qualified women who are socially and politically experienced," said Salwa Nasser, NGO Coordinator at the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW).

Whether or not a women's quota is realized ahead of national elections, expected next fall, the fact remains that the women's experience has been a discouraging one, and a considerable disincentive for their future participation. Although it is too early to calculate how many women will run, prospects for their involvement appear bleak. "We have been contacting many women pioneers to know if they are planning to present themselves as candidates, so far, no one has been able to give us an answer," Nasser said.