

Toujan

By Rana Hussein

AMMAN — Toujan Al-Faisal, the first and only woman to ever be elected to the Jordanian Lower House of Parliament, who recently was pardoned by HM King Abdullah for slandering the state and its officials, vowed to continue her political struggle by running in the upcoming elections expected to be held in the Spring of 2003.

Al-Faisal, 53, made history in 1993, by ending male monopoly in the Lower House by becoming the only woman to be elected to Parliament. She served for four years, but lost her re-election bid in 1997. Al-Faisal, claimed vote rigging for her defeat.

Al-Faisal, made history again in March when she sent an email to King Abdullah accusing the Prime Minister, Ali Abul Ragheb, and his family of benefiting from a recent decision by the government to double car insurance premiums.

Al-Faisal's email, which was also published on the - Arab Times - website prompted the state to take action against her. State Security Prosecutor filed a case against the former deputy accusing her of defaming the state and its officials. Al-Faisal was imprisoned in mid-March but was released on bail on March 27, to be rearrested two days later for attempting to hold a press conference to describe her arrest and case circumstances.

On May 16, Al-Faisal was sentenced to 18 months in prison on charges which included publishing material deemed harmful to the country's reputation and that of its citizens, and tarnishing the state. She was also convicted on charges of uttering words [while detained at the women's prison] deemed to be detrimental to religion.

As a result, Al-Faisal stopped eating prison food in protest and subsequently, was admitted to hospital after her health deteriorated. Local and human rights



Al-Faisal

activists and organizations described Al-Faisal as a 'prisoner of conscience' and sent appeals to the King and the government calling for Al-Faisal's release.

Islamists, whom Al-Faisal clashed with in the past over issues such as polygamy, stood next to her this time and called on the government to release her since she was tried under a temporary law introduced in October 2001, which many said was aimed at limiting freedom of speech and expression.

Almost a month later, King Abdullah pardoned Al-Faisal by a Royal Decree the day after the Chechen-Circassian community, to which she belongs, appealed for her release on humanitarian grounds. "It was a tough experience which only motivated me to go further," said Al-Faisal, a mother of three. Al-Faisal said her main concern now is to prepare for the upcoming elections although she was convicted with a criminal offence.

The Royal pardon did not order the reversal of the conviction, which may block Al-Faisal from running in the next parliamentary elections, according to legal experts. Under the law, those convicted in non-political cases and receive prison sentences over one year are ineligible to run for office. But Al-Faisal said this does not apply to her because she considered herself as a "prisoner of opinion." "This is a political verdict and I am not worried about it. I have already started working on the coming elections," said Al-Faisal.

Al-Faisal rose to fame in the early 1990s with battles with Islamic groups in Jordan over subjects like polygamy and later on in the Lower House over dress code. In 1989, Muslim groups declared her an apostate, and called on Jordanian courts to annul her marriage and grant immunity to anyone who shed her blood, charging that she was calling for an end to polygamy. In the end, the court dropped the case, claiming it was outside its jurisdiction.

When Al-Faisal made world news headlines by becoming the first woman ever to be elected for the Lower House, a fellow Islamist deputy welcomed her by offering sweets and 10 Islamic robes if she stopped wearing make up and started wearing Islamic dresses. However, Al-Faisal ignored his remarks and said she will devote her time to fight for the rights of people to enjoy a decent life and full democracy.

Al-Faisal had said that her liberal upbringing with its atmosphere of equality helped her achieve most of her goals. But most importantly, Al-Faisal was always proud to be elected by the people and not appointed. "I wanted to tell everyone that I was the deputy of the nation, not a deputy for a certain constituency or group," said Al-Faisal, who holds an MA in English language and literature. "I came from an open minded family that offered responsible freedom and never discriminated against women," she said. She also received full backing from her father and husband. As she time went by, Faisal said she rebelled against any rule or law she felt was unfair or illogical. "I never bowed to any law I felt was unfair without questioning it," she said.

But the real challenge for the former deputy was her first encounter with corruption, when she started working as a Jordan Television presenter of a series on women's affairs. Al-Faisal was removed from her post because she discovered an unlawful deal and since then she preferred to resign and become a standard-bearer for democracy because she felt it was her duty to inform the public about what was going on.

Al-Faisal said her future project is to write her memories in which she would document all the corruption cases she had witnessed, as well as her elections experiences. Al-Faisal concluded that her struggle is still long and filled with challenges. "When I believe in a legitimate cause I fight for it till the end - and I will never give up."