The 2013 Municipal Elections in the Israeli Arab Communities

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The 1.5 million Arabs who live in Israel constitute nearly 20 percent of the population. According to figures of late 2013, there are 257 local authorities in Israel, 85 of which are in the Arab sector.

Local government in the Arab sector has undergone a severe economic and leadership crisis in recent years, reflected in a collapse of systems and an inability to provide municipal services, difficulty in paying salaries, lawsuits, and foreclosures. The depth of the financial crisis in the Arab local authorities is evidenced by the fact that of the 31 appointed committees since 2004 established to support non-performing municipalities, 23 were in Arab communities. In late 2008, there were 54 advisory accountants in the Arab local authorities out of a total of 83 appointed for communities in Israel as a whole.

There are several reasons for this situation:
1. On the socioeconomic scale, 96 percent of the Arab local authorities have a low rating (1-4, out of 10) and about half (54 percent) of the Arab population is defined as poor. The high unemployment causes a low level of municipal property tax collection, which in turn constitutes the principal barrier to local authority management.
2. Planning and development: the Arab local authorities have difficulty coping with existing barriers. Only 2.4 percent of the industrial and employment zones are located in the Arab sector, which causes both a shortage of independent sources of income and dependence on support from the national government. Government support constitutes 67 percent of the income of the Arab local authorities, compared with 36 percent in the Jewish local authorities.
3. Budget discrimination: there are wide gaps in equalization and development grants per resident. The equalization grant per resident in the Arab local authorities amounts to 70 percent of the equalization grant per resident in the Jewish local authorities (NIS 700 and NIS 1,040, respectively). The development grant per resident in the Arab local authorities, NIS 420, is only 46 percent of the equivalent grant in the Jewish local authorities (NIS 910).

This article looks at the October 22, 2013 municipal elections in the Arab communities, which differed in style and character from the local elections elsewhere in Israel.

The Election Campaign and Voter Turnout
The campaigns in the Arab sector are generally shaped by the traditional culture, and elections are decided on the basis of family clans, not party politics. Predictably, therefore, the recent campaign focused largely on the family and clan affiliation of the candidates. Public discussion and debate did not concern the primary issues affecting Arab residents in their daily lives, or the fundamental question of which of the many candidates could change the situation. Clan representation also underlies the candidacy system and accounts for the disproportionately high number of candidates in many communities. Indeed, in many communities the race for head of the local council was not decided in the first round, and 26 communities will choose their leadership in a second round.

Over the years, the voter turnout in local elections in the Arab community has been an extremely high 85-90 percent. Likewise the 2013 elections saw a very high turnout, certainly in comparison with the nationwide figures of under 50 percent. The Arabs regard local politics as important, because it is the sole organizational framework and channel to advance their political, social, and economic development.

Particular Sectors
The Islamic Movement: An important issue featured in these elections was the position of the Islamic Movement, particularly with respect to the question of the political leadership in Umm el-Fahm. For the first time in 30 years, the Islamic Movement announced (on September 13, 2013) that it would not take part in the local elections, even though Khaled Hamdan, the incumbent mayor, was elected in 2008 under its sponsorship. Hamdan decided to run independently for mayor of Umm el-Fahm, and won with 58.5 percent of the votes.

Commentators have offered three explanations for the Islamic Movement's decision to boycott the elections. One is the movement's ongoing trend towards radicalism, which kept it from participating in the most recent Knesset elections. Two, the lack of participation reflects the movement's current weakness, even if temporary, and the trend distancing the Arab public from the movement. Three, elections were boycotted out of religious fundamentalist motives. In other words, engaging in politics, especially in local elections, takes an enormous amount of energy and time and arouses tension and rivalry, thereby diverting the movement from its principal mission and alienating political opponents from religion.

Women: One of the main issues was political representation of Arab women. Judging by the level of public discourse on this subject and the number of women candidates, it

appears that the awareness barrier on this issue was breached to some extent. For the first time, 165 Arab women from all ethnic groups – Druze, Christian, and Muslim – were on the election lists in 44 Arab local authorities. Two female candidates, one in Sakhnin and one in Kfar Qassem, headed lists of candidates running for the local council. Nineteen women held the second place on a list, 24 the third place, 23 the fourth place, and 14 the fifth place. Thirty-four of the Arab women candidates live in mixed Arab-Jewish towns.

Young Intellectuals: The educated Arab, whom Arab society greatly needs for its development and progress, usually stays away from local politics. On the one hand, he is aware of the sector's concerns and welcomes change. On the other hand, he finds himself unwanted in his society, where most political decisions are based on clans.

The Elections in Nazareth
Nazareth is considered the capital of the Arab population, and since 1978 the Hadash movement has controlled the city. The incumbent mayor, Ramiz Jaraisy, was in office since 1994. Ali Salaam, who served as deputy mayor for the past 15 years, resigned from the Hadash party four months ago, and decided to run for mayor on a non-party list. Knesset member Hanin Zouabi also ran for mayor. With Salaam's victory, the question is whether the change in Nazareth will positively affect the management of the city, and whether this indicates a weakening of the Balad and Hadash parties.

Mixed Arab-Jewish Towns
In mixed Arab-Jewish cities, two noteworthy patterns emerged. The first was the unification of all the political factions in a single joint list in order to enhance their power and increase the chances of winning seats on the town council. This occurred in Lod, Ramle, and Upper Nazareth. The second was a campaign based on separate lists, usually on a political party basis, even if this form of campaign reduces the likelihood of strong results.

Despite efforts in mixed towns to unite their lists, ultimately there were many instances of multiple candidate lists, all of which emphasized the importance of Arab representation on the town council. The results indicate clearly which organizational mode proved more successful. In Upper Nazareth, where 6,500 Arabs are eligible to vote, the Arab sector succeeded in doubling its political representation, winning three seats. In contrast, no Arab representative was elected to the city council in Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

Conclusion
The recent municipal elections showed no innovative trends that signal a turnaround or the beginning of a change in the Arab community, which has suffered for years from great distress and low social status. Rather, it appears that following a lively and at times tense campaign, the Arab community is returning to its daily routine, which may perhaps improve under the new leaderships.