

Jerusalem's municipal elections - the ballot and the boycott

Thursday, 24 October 2013

Incumbent Nir Barkat won the mayoral election in Jerusalem narrowly against the ultra-Orthodox's candidate Moshe Lion. But the conflicts between Jews, Christians and Palestinians will not be solved: The friend of Prime Minister Netanyahu defends settlement plans in the Eastern parts of the divided city.

The 54-year-old software millionaire Barkat had little doubt before the election to remain mayor of Jerusalem. But he probably would not have expected such a close election result. With only 51 percent of all votes, it was a head to head race. Thoroughly, Barkat's stance is evidence of self-confidence in a city in which the rabbis only need to have a bad night to withdraw their support for a candidate. Then, thousands of ultra-religious Jerusalemites of all shades vote different than expected. In this way, Ehud Olmert defeated Teddy Kollek, who had previously been the mayor of Jerusalem for 28 years, in 1993. The vote for the city council continued a national trend of the Knesset elections: there are more secular representatives but there are also more extreme-right wing members, including the hard-right, racist activist Aryeh King, who had one of the most Islamophobic, Arab-hating campaigns.

Nir Barkat likes to tell about how misgoverned Jerusalem was before he was elected as mayor for the first time five years ago and how well the city does since then: a balanced budget, more culture, and three times as many jobs as before he took over office. But considering all facts, Nir Barkat de facto governs over a divided city.

In Jerusalem, 37 percent of the 800,000 residents are Palestinians. They live mostly in the Eastern part of the city which was annexed in 1967 by Israel. A special status was created for Palestinians living in the occupied area of the city: they were not recognized as Israeli citizens but could vote in Jerusalem's municipal elections. Most Palestinians have traditionally boycotted the municipal polls to protest the Israeli occupation. The PLO has called for a boycott of municipal elections since 1967 and it urges that no Palestinian from here should participate in the elections either by voting or running for a seat. "Participating in these elections will be considered normalization with the Israeli occupation authority, which means legitimizing the annexation of Jerusalem." The boycott generally enjoys support within the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem. Nevertheless, some were calling for an end to the boycott in this year's election, held on October 22nd. Campaigners were convinced that participating in the poll could mitigate some of the discrimination Palestinian residents face in the city.

There, the standard of living is significantly lower than in the West of Jerusalem although more than half of the population, irrespective of their nationality, lives there. Only one tenth of the city's municipal budget is allocated to the Eastern parts. In East Jerusalem, not only the garbage disposal is less common, there are also fewer schools, municipal pre-school kindergartens (West Jerusalem 173; East Jerusalem 10), fewer welfare offices operating (14:3), fewer mother and baby medical centers (25:4), fewer post offices (42:9), and the average annual budget allocated to Arab high schools per student is only \$4,272 compared to \$7,493 allocated to Jewish high schools per student. Taking into account these facts, it is hardly surprising that 73% of Arab families in Jerusalem live below the poverty line compared to 24% of Jewish families. Even more worrying is the effect these facts have on children living in East Jerusalem. An estimated 85% of Palestinian children in Jerusalem live below the poverty line compared with 43% of Jewish children in the city. The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem accused the local government therefore of "systematic discrimination" against the Arab population of the city. Barkat indignantly denies the call, he says. "We take care of all citizens". However, he admits that he has not even advertised to the voice of the Palestinians. That had "no sense," he said.

On these grounds, it was not unexpected that on the day of the municipal elections the polling stations in East Jerusalem were empty, only filled with official election posters and vacant voting booths. Fahid, a poll worker who had been interviewed by Maan News on the election's day, explained: "We have a problem with the people who are responsible for Jerusalem, for they don't help the Arab sector as they should. Secondly, we maintain the decision to boycott the elections until the Arab sector enjoys support." In the last municipal elections only 2% of the residents of East Jerusalem voted. In this year's elections it was about the same. Boycott or not, Palestinians' frustrations with discrimination by Israeli municipal authorities paint a bleak portrait of East Jerusalem's future under Israeli municipal control.