

The Workshop on Parliaments in the Arab World: Opportunities and Challenges for Liberal Political Parties. Rabat-Morocco (March 25-27, 2010)

Upon an invitation from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (thanks to Dr Meinardus in Cairo office, and to Suleiman Abu Dayyeh and Rana Alami in Jerusalem office) and the Arab Liberal network, I participated along with the chairman of the Freedom Forum Palestine (FFP) Mr. Aref Jaffal in the above – mentioned workshop. After arriving Majliss Hotel in Rabat around 6p.m. Thursday (March 25, 2010) evening we were invited to a dinner in Casablanca with Mr. Hans van Baalen, the President of the Liberal International and leader of the delegation and spokesperson on foreign affairs and Defense for the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy in the European Parliament. It was a very interesting and enriching meeting for me since it was my first time to participate in a workshop organized by the Network of Arab Liberals (NAL), and I had the chance to meet with people representing liberal parties from different Arab countries including Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. I was also fascinated by the Moroccan hospitality and modesty at that dinner. The following day (Friday March 26). I also had the chance to meet with representatives from Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan during the opening session at the Moroccan parliament.

The panel of the opening session at the parliament consisted of Mr. Mohammad Tamaldou, the President of NAL and politburo member of the Constitutional Union Party in Morocco along with Dr. Meinardus and Mr. Van Baalen. Each one of them gave a speech about liberalism and liberal parties in the Arab World. Mr. Van Baalen gave a briefing about the liberal International and its mission and function. He mentioned that he was pleased to see us the Palestinian representatives there despite the difficult situation we are going through. Then the Moroccan Finance Minister and the President of the National Congregation for Liberals party (which is part of the government coalition in Morocco) Mr. Salah Edin Mizwar gave an informative speech about the experience of Liberalism in Morocco and the role of the parliament in the reform process .

Then we moved to the second session in a top storey meeting hall in the parliament building where there were two speakers the first of who was Dr. Youssef Tibesse a professor of logic and modern philosophy at the University of Mohammad Bin Abdallah in Fes. Dr. Tibesse's paper was entitled" **Liberalism: Concepts and Constraints: Individual Freedoms and separation of powers and their significance to the democratic liberalism**". He sustained that the main function of the political parties are: theorization, consolidation and changing. Then he talked about the concept of liberalism as an enlightening human thought and also discussed the economic liberalism, followed by political liberalism and liberal democracy. He also quoted Friedrich von Hayke in stating that democracy is a means and not an end by itself.

The second speaker was Dr. Mohammad Tharif who talked about the “Shura Councils” i.e. consultation councils as a synonym to modern parliaments. He mentioned that six Arab countries name their parliaments as “ Shura Councils” as an attempt to keep the tradition from old Islamic periods. Those countries include Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen. He also made a comparison between the Shura in the Arab countries and the western concepts of parliaments.

In the afternoon session, delegations of each of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine have discussed the role of their parliaments and strategies of member political parties given the unique situation in Palestine. Mr. Jaffal presented the situation in Palestine, whereas I had to respond to a question about advantage of having mix electoral system represented by both constituencies and slates.

In the evening, we attended an introductory meeting of the book entitled “**Liberalism in the Arab World**” that was written by several authors including Mr. Hazem Qawasmi from Palestine .Two discussants along with Dr. Meinardus were on the panel, one of who by the name Lahsan Haddad who was so impressive in his analysis and creativity. The latter’s main remark was that the book was a study endeavor and not a book of thought. Yet, he commended the efforts exerted towards bringing that book into being.

The next day ,Saturday, March 27, 2010, the opening session included a presentation given by a Moroccan member of the parliament who talked about roles and future horizons.

Then we were divided into two groups to set strategies for promoting the role of liberal powers in Arab parliaments and discussing the joint declaration of the NAL on Arab parliaments. Then results of the work groups were introduced and the joint declaration was discussed. A spirited discussion took place after a suggestion made by Mr. Tamaldo regarding women quota in Arab parliaments. The participants were divided between those who were in favor including myself and those were against. The first party argued that women would not have a fair share in the parliament without a quota whereas the second party believed it was a sort of humiliation for a woman.

After having lunch with the delegation of the liberal party (ELDR), we attended with them the session on the Arab immigration into Europe especially from the Maghreb countries there. There were two presentations from representatives of the European parliament and another one by a Moroccan lady by the name Hakima who impressed us by the data she had regarding this issue. Although I was hoping that the discussion take place among high ranking officials on both sides of the Mediterranean , yet it was still one of the most interesting sessions where a spirited discussion took place among us all. Some comments were more inclined towards blaming the European countries for the polarization that is taking place in Europe, whereas others blamed immigrant communities for not exerting

sufficient efforts to integrate. The issue of clash of civilizations that Samuel Huntington wrote about in his famous book "Clash of Civilizations" was brought up as well. A lively discussion took place as different points of view were given.

All in all, the workshop was very interesting, enriching and informative. We the Palestinian delegation had an active participation and communicated with almost everybody. I also appreciate if FNF office in Cairo makes the contact list of participants available to us.

Submitted by Dr. Walid Shomaly
April 12, 2010