



Jordan: First Jordanian Woman Parliamentarian sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for defamation

Toujan Faisal was the first woman to be elected to the Jordanian Parliament in 1993. A Circassian (member of a constituency originally deriving from the Caucasus in a Muslim exodus in 1863 after the Russian invasion) Toujan has always been a very active, direct and strong parliamentarian who has represented opposition views and taken a vociferous stance against corruption. Shortly after being elected in 1993, Faisal declared that she was a deputy "*of the nation, not a deputy of a certain constituency or group.*"

On 6 March 2002 Al Faisal published an open letter to King Abullah II on the website of the United States-based newspaper Arab Times accusing the Jordanian Prime Minister Ali Abu Ragheb of corruption. She claimed that the recent doubling of the cost of government-mandated automobile insurance was intended to benefit the major insurance companies in Jordan (several of which were owned or partly owned by the Prime Minister himself).

Al Faisal who is a former television talk show anchor, columnist, human rights activist and a mother of three, was arrested on the 16th of March 2002 on seditious libel charges. The State Security Court prosecutor released her on bail on the 27th of March 2007 but she was arrested again two days later on the eve of a press conference she was due to hold in her home. Mrs. Faisal was forced to defend herself in court following her lawyers' withdrawal from the case on the grounds that judges' rulings had made it impossible for him to defend her.

On the 16th of May 2002 she was convicted by the State Security Court on charges of "tarnishing the Jordanian state", defamation of the judiciary, "*uttering words*" before another deemed to be "*detrimental to his religious feeling*", "*publishing and broadcasting false information abroad which could be detrimental to the reputation of the state*", and inciting "*disturbances and killings.*" She was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, the maximum sentence allowed under such charges.

Al Faisal was the first victim of the new measures used by the Jordanian government to fight 'terrorism' and clamp down on individuals' right to criticise government policy in

Jordan. While in prison, she went on hunger strike, losing 16kg in less than a month. On the 26th of June 2002, after 29 days without eating, she was freed from prison by a special royal pardon. “My weight dropped 16 kilogrammes down to 49,” Al Faisal told the press when she was released from the Farah Center of the King Hussein Medical Center where she was hospitalised.

Nevertheless, the royal pardon did not annul her conviction: A ruling from the 2003 Elections Committee subsequently deprived her of the right to stand as a candidate in the next parliamentary elections. Al Faisal appealed against the decision but the appeal was rejected on the grounds that she had been jailed for more than one year for a non-political offense.

Toujan Al Faisal’s story is a harsh reminder of the great threats posed to freedom of expression by criminal defamation. But more than that, it is a tremendous example of courage displayed by freedom of expression activists across the globe: in the upcoming elections of 2007, Toujan Faisal will once more be running in the Parliamentary elections for the Circassian quota seat in the 5th district in Amman (Wadi Seer and surroundings).

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