



Cracking down on 'feckless youth'

Why are British politicians ignoring young voters and their interests?

FEATURES

World's youngest mayor goes back to school

Fifteen-year-old Palestinian girl served as mayor of Allar in West Bank after town leaders gave their jobs to teenagers.

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For the past week, Bashaer Othman has been busy meeting with parliamentarians in Jakarta, Indonesia, pushing them to enact projects to incorporate young people into civic life. The trip, however, cost her some precious time away from her high school studies back home in the West Bank - after all, she's only 15.

For two months this summer, Othman took the mayoral reigns of a small town with a population of about 8,000 called Allar, just outside the northern West Bank city of Tulkarem. As part of a youth empowerment programme, Othman became Allar's - and the world's - youngest mayor, listening to citizens' problems, signing documents, reading reports and chairing meetings.

During her time as mayor, Othman took control of the day-to-day running of Allar's municipality. She inaugurated a new fire department, opened up a public park and resided over the establishment of a stone quarry. She also represented Allar on an official delegation to Qatar.

The town's regular mayor, Sufian Shadid and his council, gave up their seats to Othman and her team of 11 teenagers, five of which were female. The team mirrored the municipal council in composition and tasks, and was responsible for everything except financial issues.

Othman said that the regular mayor was more than willing to have her team take over. "I asked the mayor if I could get a feel for his work for a week, and he said 'yes'," Othman said. "He even told me I should do it for two months to really understand the nuances of institutional work."

Throughout this unusual journey, Othman was heralded as the youngest mayor in the world. However, she also shattered a glass ceiling, becoming the first female mayor of the town.

Minimal oversight

During her term, Shadid would pass by once a day to see if she and her team of councillors had any questions.

"The adults gave us the space we needed," Othman said. "But they were available whenever we needed them for guidance."

Othman and her team are originally part of what is known in Palestine as "youth councils". These councils, which mirror the municipalities in their makeup, are peppered across the West Bank to encourage young Palestinians - who make up roughly half of the population - to take part in civic life.

There are 18 Local Youth Councils in the West Bank, working with municipalities and focusing on empowering youth to take part in the decision-making process. Othman started off in Allar's youth council, serving as its first female president before becoming mayor.

To Othman, this experience was about encouraging her peers to take on roles of leadership and to get a message across to those in power.

Othman's analysis is right according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, which puts unemployment at 23.7 per cent for Palestinians who have graduated high school.

Given the fact that municipal elections are just a month away, Othman's experience is all the more relevant to her and her peers.

"The moral achievements are far more rewarding" than any other aspects of her two-month term, Othman said. "The fear factor among young Palestinians was broken and we became role models for others our age, especially at a time when real local elections are about to take place."

Back to school

These days, it's back to business as usual for Othman. She is busy with homework, visiting girlfriends and playing computer games in her spare time.

But the teenager is also eyeing a future in diplomacy or civic leadership. She knows she has a few years ahead of her, and she plans to study international relations and social development.

With a lot of support from her parents and six siblings, Othman said she will continue to push for youth participation in decision-making.

Next January, she will be heading back to Indonesia to help establish youth councils throughout the Muslim country.