

Arab Israeli barred from Public Sector employment

Affirmative action promises ignored

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Nazareth- Unemployed computer engineer Morad Lashin would like to work in Israel's Electricity Company, a large state utility, but admits his chances of being recruited are slim.

The reasons were set out in graphic form this month when a parliamentary committee revealed that only 1.3 per cent of the company's 12,000 workers are Arab, despite the Arab minority constituting nearly 20 per cent of the population.

The committee's report presents a picture of massive under-representation of Arab citizens across most of the public sector, including in government companies and ministries, where the percentage of Arab staff typically falls below two per cent of employees.

According to Sikkuy, a group lobbying for greater civic equality, discriminatory hiring policies have left thousands of Arab graduates jobless, even though the government promised affirmative action a decade ago.

Mr Lashin, 30, from Nazareth, said his remaining hope was to find a job in the public sector after a series of short-term contracts in private hi-tech firms. "Everywhere you go, they ask if you have served in the army. Because Arab citizens are exempt, the good jobs are always reserved for Jews."

Ali Haider, a co-director of Sikkuy, said: "What kind of example is set for the Israeli private sector when the government consistently finds excuses not to employ Arab citizens too?"

Ahmed Tibi, who heads the parliamentary committee on Arab employment in the public sector, said that even when government bodies appointed Arabs it was invariably in lowly positions. "The absence of Arabs in [senior] roles means that they have no say in the ministries' decision-making processes," he said.

The issue of under-representation in Israel's public sector was first acknowledged by officials in 2000, when the Fair Representation Law was passed under pressure from Arab political parties.

However, no target was set for the proportion of Arab employees until 2004, when the government agreed that within four years Arabs should comprise 10 per cent of all staff in ministries, state bodies and on the boards of hundreds of government companies. Later the deadline was extended to 2012.

The new report found that overall six per cent of the country's 57,000 public sector workers were Arab, only marginally higher than a decade ago.

But Mr Tibi noted that the figures were substantially boosted by the large number of “counter staff” in the interior, welfare, health and education ministries employed to provide basic services inside Arab communities.

On publication of the report this month, Avishai Braverman, the minorities minister, admitted there was no hope of reaching even the delayed target. He criticised his own government for not setting its sights higher, at 20 per cent representation.

The committee’s findings, said Mr Tibi, showed officials had systematically broken their promises on fair representation. He noted that even in the parliament itself there were only six Arab workers out of 439, or 1.6 per cent. “What does it say that in the temple of Israeli democracy there is such rank discrimination?”

Similar percentages were found in key government departments, including the prime minister’s office, the foreign ministry, the treasury, the housing ministry, and the trade and industry ministry, as well as such state agencies as the Bank of Israel, the Land Administration and the Water Authority.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, to which Israel acceded last week, reported last year that 15,000 Arab graduates were either unemployed or forced into work outside their professions, often as teachers.

Mr Tibi said he was particularly concerned that there were no Arabs in key roles inside government ministries. “Not by chance are there no senior Arab civil servants, no deputy directors in the ministries, no legal advisers,” he said.

He said the absence of Arab policy-makers was reflected in the lack of public services and resources made available to Arab communities. Poverty among Arab families is three times higher than among Jewish families.

Yousef Jabareen, director of the Dirasat policy centre in Nazareth, said increased recruitment of Arab workers by the government could solve at a stroke two urgent problems: the large pool of Arab graduates who could not find work, and the community’s lack of influence on national policy.

He added that discrimination against Arabs was “built into the institutional structure of a Jewish state”.

The report was received with hostility by some MPs. Yariv Levin, chairman of the parliament’s House Committee and a member of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party, said the report was “delusional and ignores the fundamental fact that a significant portion of Israel’s Arabs are disloyal to the state”.

Saleem Marna, 37, who graduated as an information systems engineer 10 years ago from the prestigious Technion University in Haifa, said he had given up hope of finding regular work in either the private or public sectors.

Married with four children, he said he had applied to emigrate to Canada. “I am hopeful that being an Arab won’t count against me there.”

Hatim Kanaaneh, a Harvard-educated doctor who worked as one of the few senior Arab

officials in the Israeli health ministry until his resignation in the early 1990s, documented the many battles he faced in the government bureaucracy in his recent book Doctor in Galilee.

Dr Kanaaneh said no Arab had ever risen above the position of sub-district physician he held two decades ago. Although the health ministry had the largest number of Arab employees of any ministry, he said none had ever been appointed to a policy-making position.

“In fact, people in the ministry tell me things have gone backwards under recent right-wing governments.”

He added that the lack of Arab policymakers in government had concrete consequences that damaged the Arab community. When he worked in the health ministry, he noted, the Arab infant mortality rate was twice that of the Jewish population. Two decades later the ratio of Arab to Jewish infant deaths, rather than declining, had increased by a further 25 per cent.

The prejudice faced by educated Arabs seeking employment was highlighted by a survey last November. It found that 83 per cent of Israeli businesses in the main professions admitted being opposed to hiring Arab graduates.

Yossi Coten, director of a training programme in Nazareth, said of 84,000 jobs in the country’s hi-tech industries, only 500 were filled by Arab engineers.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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