

My Oath to Israel's "Jewish Democracy"

Why my fingers will be crossed

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Nazareth — In all likelihood, I will be one of the very first non-Jews expected to swear loyalty to Israel as an ideology rather than as a state.

Until now, naturalising residents, like the country's soldiers, pledged an oath to Israel and its laws. That is the situation in most countries. But soon, if the Israeli parliament passes a bill being advanced by the government, aspiring citizens will instead be required to uphold the Zionist majority's presumption that Israel is a "Jewish and democratic state".

My application for citizenship is due to be considered in the next few months, seven years after my marriage to a Palestinian citizen of Israel. The country's 1.3 million Palestinians — usually referred to by officials as "Israeli Arabs" — are a fifth of the population. I, like a few others in my position, am likely to make such a pledge through gritted teeth and with my fingers crossed behind my back. Whatever I declare publicly to interior ministry officials will be a lie. Here are the reasons why.

One is that this law is unapologetically racist. It applies only to applicants for citizenship who are non-Jews. That is not because, as most observers assume, all Jews in Israel would willingly make the pledge but because one significant group would refuse, thereby nullifying their right to become Israelis. That group is the ultra-Orthodox, religious fundamentalists distinctive for their black dress, who are the fastest growing group among Israel's Jewish population. They despise Israel's secular state institutions and would make a loyalty oath only to a state guided by divine law.

So Israel is demanding from non-Jews what it does not require of Jews.

Another reason is that I do not believe a Jewish state can be democratic, any more than I believe a democratic state can be Jewish. I think the two principles are as incompatible as a "Christian and democratic state" or a "white and democratic state". I am not alone in this assessment. Eminent academics at Israel's universities think the same. They have concluded that the self-declared Jewish state qualifies not as a liberal democracy but as a much rarer political entity: an ethnocracy.

One of the leading exponents of this view, Professor Oren Yiftachel of Ben Gurion University in the Negev, points out that in ethnocracies, the democratic aspects of the regime are only skin deep. Its primary goal is to maintain one ethnic group's dominance over another. Israel, it should be noted, has many laws but none guarantees equality. The discrimination, Prof Yiftachel notes, is legislated into the structure of citizenship so that one ethnic group is entitled to privileges at the expense of the other group in all basic aspects of life: access to

land and water, the economy, education, political control, and so on.

Even the ethnic group's majority status is maintained through sophisticated gerrymandering: Israel gives citizenship to Jewish settlers living outside its recognised borders, while banning the Palestinians it expelled in 1948 from ever enjoying immigration rights that are shared by Jews worldwide.

The third reason is that the new oath itself strengthens an elaborate structure of institutionalised discrimination based on Israel's citizenship laws.

Few outsiders understand that Israel provides citizenship under two different laws, depending on whether you are a Jew or a non-Jew. All Jews and Jewish immigrants, as well as their spouses, are entitled to automatic citizenship under the Law of Return. Meanwhile, the citizenship of Israel's Palestinians — as well as that of naturalising spouses like myself — is governed by the Citizenship Law. It is this bifurcated citizenship that made possible a previous outrage: Israel's ban on the right of its Palestinian citizens to win citizenship, or often even residency rights, for a Palestinian spouse through naturalisation.

It is again the Citizenship Law for Palestinians, not the Law of Return for Jews, that Israel is preparing to revise to force the spouses of Palestinian citizens, myself included, to pledge an oath to the very state that confers on them and their Palestinian partners second-class citizenship.

The fourth reason is that this oath is a classic example of "slippery slope" legislation. Despite the exultations of Avigdor Lieberman, the far-right minister who campaigned under the election slogan "No loyalty, no citizenship", this law in its current formulation will probably apply to only a few hundred applicants each year.

Currently exempt are all existing citizens, whether Jews or Palestinians; non-Jewish spouses of Jews naturalising under the Law of Return; and Palestinian partners blocked entirely from the naturalisation process. Only the tiny number of non-Jewish spouses of Israel's Palestinian citizens will have to take the pledge. But few believe that the oath will remain so marginal for ever. A principle of tying citizenship rights to a declaration of loyalty is being established in Israel for the first time.

The next targets for this kind of legislation are the non-Zionist political parties of Israel's Palestinian minority. The Jewish parties are already formulating bills to require parliament members to swear an oath to a "Jewish and democratic state". That is designed to neuter Israel's Palestinian parties, all of which share as their main platform a demand that Israel reform from a Jewish state into a "state of all its citizens", or a liberal democracy.

Next in Lieberman's sights, of course, are all of Israel's 1.3 million Palestinians, who will be expected to become Zionists or face a loss of citizenship and possibly expulsion. I may be one of the first non-Jews to make this pledge, but many are sure to be forced to follow me.

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