



PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH

Vera Baboun Mayor of Bethlehem

October 20th, 2012, was an exciting day in Vera Baboun's life. This was the day, after all, when she was elected as the mayor of Bethlehem, and the first female mayor of a Palestinian city. The immense adversity which she faced in her mayoral campaign became irrelevant on that day, and her excitement prevailed. Because at that moment, she had the means to make the changes she desperately believed were needed in her hometown.

On this day, many hailed Baboun's election as progress for gender equality in Palestine. "At the personal level, I consider this an accomplishment," she says, "but at the societal level, we've still got a long way to go." The most viable way for our society to progress, she believes, is to empower women to have more confidence in their voices, thereby influencing change in their surroundings. "Build your own ideology, one which seems impossible to accomplish," she says boldly.



Baboun's past has been marred with hardships, and several years prior to becoming a mayor, her daily life was quite different. A mere five years into their marriage, her husband was taken into the custody of the Occupation, leaving her as the sole breadwinner for her five young children. This, Baboun claims, is what nurtured her spirit of leadership. For twenty-one years, she was a professor of literature at Bethlehem University, where she was also a leader to her students.

"Leadership is in every decision you make," Mayor Baboun explains. "You can lead when you lecture." While teaching at the university, she was also a researcher for GRACE Palestine, and is credited with the publication of a study relating to the empowerment of Palestinian women using information and communication technologies.

Since her election, a typical day for Mayor Baboun might entail any number of pressing matters. She has, for example, spearheaded a fierce campaign against the expansion of the Israeli barrier wall through the Cremisan Valley. To this end, a day in the mayor's life may sometimes include a visit with the Pope, something she has done three times since becoming the mayor of Bethlehem. There's one visit, however, to which she holds particular significance. In this meeting, she explained to the Vatican the importance of the Cremisan Valley to the Christian presence in Bethlehem. Mayor Baboun adds that the Israeli authorities has unfortunately resubmitted a new order to the land owners to the effect that the Wall will still be constructed as previously planned except for the nunnery and the convent to remain under Palestinian control while more than 3,000 dunums, owned by Beit Jala Christian citizens, will be confiscated. Baboun vows to keep on the struggle that has been going on since 2006.

Free time is rare in the Mayor's typical day. "A problem follows you wherever you are.



Public service is done for the collective. It does not have a specific time." Nevertheless, Baboun is an enthusiast of the arts enjoying time outside of the office. As a literary scholar, she has a great appreciation for the written word, and often spends her personal time writing.

And yet, for this leader who is guided so heavily by her giving nature, such free time is uncommon. Whether she is inside her office or out and about in the community, Vera Baboun is fervently devoted to the residents of her hometown of Bethlehem.



Interview conducted, and article written by Elias G. Rizek, TWIP.

