

Press Release

Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought to Azmi Bishara

The Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought awards its prize this year to Dr. Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset. The prize, awarded for special contributions to freedom of speech and democracy in the Arab World, will be presented on Saturday 14th December 2002 in the German capital Berlin.

The Ibn-Rushd Fund, named after the philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126-1198, a.k.a. Averroes), supports freedom of speech and democracy in the Arab World by awarding this prize. The thematic focus varies annually: so far, people from the fields of journalism, women's rights and humanities were honoured. This year, the prize will be awarded to an Arab personality who has shown special commitment to promoting democracy as a member of parliament.

An independent jury elected Dr. Azmi Bishara. The Palestinian intellectual, born in Nazareth in 1956, is an Israeli citizen. Since 1996, he has been a member of the Knesset. Bishara started to be engaged in political activities already as a high school student; as a university student, he co-founded the Union of Arab Students, the first political organisation of this kind in Israel. From 1980 to 1985, he studied Philosophy and Political Science at the Humboldt-University in Berlin. In Ramallah, West Bank, he co-founded the Institute for Democracy and was involved in publishing many important studies in the field of research on democracy. From 1986 to 1996 held a chair for Cultural Sciences, Philosophy and Political Theory at Bir Zeit University near Ramallah, West Bank.. Furthermore, he did research at the Van Leer-Institute in Jerusalem from 1990 to 1996.

As an Arabic member of the Knesset he is committed to the right of the Arabs in Israel; he also support the fight for independence of the Palestinians living in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. 1999 he ran for prime minister to create a true alternative to the political line of the Labour-party and the Likud. His aim was to put topics such as the following on the political agenda: an end to the discrimination of Israel's Arab citizens, a halt to the expropriation of Arab lands, the recognition of Arab villages.

Western countries like to call Israel the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. Bishara questions this claim; he criticises Israel as a state for part of its citizens only and finds the state of occupation in its essence similar to the system of Apartheid. His main point is that, in the long run, Israel cannot remain a Jewish state, if it wants to remain a democratic state. A truly democratic state had to separate state and religion and represent the interest of all its citizens, instead of amalgamating religion and state and thus be able to instrumentalise religion for political purposes, says Bishara. At present, Israel's roughly one million Arab citizens, about 20 percent of its population, were noticeably discriminated against.

Bishara criticised early on the Israeli conditions to Palestinian autonomy as a "separation without sovereignty". Only a solution on the basis of equality and justice could be long-lasting, such as two states for two peoples, or a democratic, secular, and binational state.

Bishara is aware of the effect he makes as a democratic Arab politician on other Arab countries. He knows that he is held up as an example when he holds a speech against Sharon's politics in parliament. "With TV, now the whole Arab world sees us. The Arab world asks 'How can you shout and say those things and challenge the Israeli minister, but [...] nobody puts you in jail, at least not directly?' This, I can say, is having an effect." In this way, Bishara makes use of the effect that his democratic fight has, thanks to the media, on the state of political awareness of citizens from other Arab countries, whose political systems are less democratic.

At present, however, Bishara is threatened by a trial in Israel: his colleagues in parliament voted for lifting his parliamentary immunity already by the end of 2001. He is still awaiting his trial. This is a novelty in Israel's history: never before has a political comment of a member of parliament had legal repercussions.

The IBN RUSHD PRIZE for Freedom of Thought will be awarded, in the presence of the prize-winner, on December 14th 2002. The ceremony will begin at 11.00 hrs at the Werkstatt der Kulturen in the German capital Berlin.