

October 7, 2010

The plans to revoke citizenship

Ron Gerlitz

The proposed amendment to the Citizenship Law joins Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's plan for a territorial exchange – in an overall process designed to displace the Arab minority and expel it from the state. That was not the intention of the fathers of Zionism

The uproar surrounding the foreign minister's plan for a territorial exchange has yet to die down, and the government is already rushing to approve another proposal hatched by the chairman of Yisrael Beitenu, which was presented at the United Nations General Assembly – a draft proposal that requires pledging loyalty to the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, as a condition for receiving citizenship. It is important to examine the true significance of these plans, which are interrelated and are a means to the same end.

Implementation of the loyalty oath proposal would in effect revoke or deny citizenship from Arabs who seek it, if they are unwilling to recognize the state as a Jewish state. The demand that Arabs express support for the Jewishness of the state is unethical, because it means asking them to support the very characteristic that they consider a major cause of their historical catastrophe and the ongoing discrimination against them. At the same time, this demand contradicts a basic democratic concept – namely that citizens not be required to espouse any specific opinions.

In order to understand the significance of Lieberman's plan, we first have to expose the fraud called "the territorial exchange plan" – as though it represented a symmetrical exchange of territories between countries. That is not the case.

In the territories on the other side of the Green Line there are Israeli citizens who came to live in the settlements after 1967, and now, according to the plan, will maintain both their place of residence and their citizenship. On the other hand, in the territories within the Green Line that are slated for exchange, there are hundreds of thousands of Arab citizens who have lived there for many years, even before the establishment of the state, and whose citizenship will now be revoked through the plan. Therefore, what the plan really means, and what it should be called, is "the plan to revoke citizenship."

The purpose and outcome of these plans is the same – to send a clear message to the Arab citizens: Your citizenship is in danger. Sit quietly, or we'll take it away from you and leave you as residents without rights. When this message comes from the man who holds the title of deputy prime minister or is led by the justice minister – the threat becomes official and escalates the internal conflict within Israel.

However, the "plan to revoke citizenship" has no chance of being implemented. We also must hope that the High Court of Justice will reject legislation that confronts anyone requesting citizenship with a test of his beliefs. As far as territorial exchange is concerned - an in-depth

examination of the geography and demography of the areas in which the plan is supposed to be implemented (mainly in the areas within the Green Line that are slated for exclusion from the territory of the State of Israel), and taking into account the world's reaction to such an act – indicate that the plan is totally unrealistic.

Lieberman is also well aware of that, but he is trying to score electoral points, which are always up for grabs for anyone who incites against minorities and tries to get rid of them. The problem for all of us is that these bizarre plans represent a substantial portion of the public discourse; instead of seeking real ways of changing the volatile relations between Arabs and Jews within Israel, we are busy with threats.

But there is also an ethical, internal Jewish-Zionist issue here, which deserves attention. The idea of establishing the State of Israel originated in Europe with Zionist thinkers who understood that modern, liberal Europe was incapable of containing the Jews within it. In the end it vomited them out, at best, and in most cases trapped them inside the fire.

Therefore we gathered in the Land of Israel, in a just historical process. Even during these dark days, that should be said. But Lieberman's plans add another stage to the Jewish national project: revoking citizenship from the Arab minority or denying it to them, and expelling them from the state.

In other words, the state that was established here in order to deal with the inability to accept us as a minority – is itself incapable of accepting a minority.

These steps are tantamount to a public declaration that the State of Israel, a product of the Zionist enterprise, is incapable of being multifaceted, pluralistic and democratic. The last stage of the Zionist enterprise, according to the plan, will be mass revocation of citizenship and the creation of a homogeneous and intolerant state.

The very fact that these plans are being proposed is not only anti-Arab, it is also anti-Zionist – and primarily, very bad news for this country and all its inhabitants, both Jews and Arabs.

Ron Gerlitz is co-executive director of Sikkuy: The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality