



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Arab Reform Bulletin
April 2006, Volume 4, Issue 3
Michele Dunne, Editor
Julia Choucair, Assistant Editor

Jordan: Islamic Action Front Presses for Role in Governing

Curtis R. Ryan

Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political party of the Muslim Brotherhood, has had its share of electoral success and is now positioning itself to demand more of a role in governance. While terrorist bombings in 2005 left the Front worried about the new security-preoccupied government, Hamas's electoral victory in Palestine has emboldened the IAF to translate its popularity into greater political clout.

In 1989, when the Hashemite regime initiated elections for the lower house of parliament, the Muslim Brotherhood was poised to reap the benefits of decades of organization. It secured 22 parliamentary seats (out of a total of 80), while independent Islamists won an additional 12. The movement used its parliamentary strength to elect an Islamist speaker of the parliament, while other Islamists were even invited to take cabinet posts.

Under a new electoral law in 1993, however, the IAF secured only 16 parliamentary seats while independent Islamists dropped to a mere six. When the regime refused to repeal the electoral law, the IAF led the opposition in an 11-party boycott of the 1997 elections. Islamists then shifted their efforts toward the professional associations, where in short order they won the leadership posts of almost every association in the kingdom.

The 2003 elections were the first under King Abdullah II, and marked the return of the opposition to electoral politics. Seventeen IAF members gained parliamentary seats (including Hayat Al Massimi, who gained the first seat under the women's quota), along with five independent Islamists, in a parliament now expanded to 110 members.

While the IAF remained focused on its own Islamist political agenda, most legislation continued to emerge from the government itself, with the parliament serving as a debating forum that usually provided a legislative stamp of approval. The IAF had little ability to

advance its broad goals of implementing Islamic law, preventing normalization of ties with Israel, and ultimately of abrogating the peace treaty entirely. The IAF did, however, align itself with other conservative forces in order to block government attempts to change Jordan's laws regarding honor crimes, specifically the lenient legal framework for sentencing men who killed female relatives suspected of shaming the family.

In November 2005 Al Qaeda suicide bombers struck three luxury hotels in central Amman, killing 60 people—mostly Jordanians—and injuring more than 100. The IAF and the Muslim Brotherhood were among the first to respond by organizing anti-al-Qaeda demonstrations. But Islamists in parliament found themselves squaring off with the government following a major cabinet reshuffle. The new government reflected a regime in security-mode, led by Prime Minister Marouf Al Bakhit (former ambassador to Israel and a security hawk) and with conservative royalists Abdul Hadi Al Majali and former Prime Minister Zayd Al Rifai as speakers of the lower and upper houses of parliament.

The government meanwhile called for preemptive war on militant forms of Islamism, which the IAF and Muslim Brotherhood feared might be used against them. In January 2006, the government charged IAF leader Jamil Abu Bakr with “harming the dignity of the state.” The charges stemmed from articles on the IAF website that criticized the government tendency to appoint officials due mainly to connections rather than expertise or parliamentary consultations. The charges were dropped the following month, but the sense of harassment remained.

Just as security factors have made life more difficult for the IAF, however, the sweeping victory of Hamas in Palestinian legislative elections has re-invigorated Jordan's already well-organized Islamist movement. With its campaign emphasis on anti-corruption and social welfare activities, Hamas was in many ways adopting the tactics of Jordan's IAF and Muslim Brotherhood, with which it had even shared office space at one time. But unlike Hamas, the IAF and Muslim Brotherhood do not have a militant wing. Hamas representatives were expelled from Jordan in 1999; the IAF is now calling on the government to recognize Hamas's achievement by restoring ties.

For many Islamists, the Hamas victory was inspiring but also a reminder of their comparative limitations. While Hamas's electoral win translated immediately into a new Hamas-led government, 17 years of Islamist electoral success in Jordan has produced no chance whatsoever to form an IAF government. Consequently, IAF leaders have recently become bolder in articulating their policy priorities as well as in demanding that the government stop harming the Islamist movement through electoral laws designed to minimize their representation.

IAF deputies have charged that in freer and fairer elections they might win 40 to 50 percent of the vote. They further argue that the cabinet should be drawn from parliament rather than appointed by the palace. In the current wrangling over a new law on parties and elections, this issue of linking elections to actual governance remains a key point of struggle between the government and IAF, as they bargain over the ground rules for the 2007 parliamentary elections and the nature of the Jordanian state itself.

Curtis R. Ryan is Associate Professor of Political Science at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, and is the author of Jordan in Transition: From Hussein to Abdullah (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).