

The Islamist Boycott of Jordanian Municipal Elections: A Victory of Public Relations or Politics?

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Brief Analysis

On July 31, in a contest widely seen as a tune-up for November's parliamentary balloting, Jordanians went to the polls for municipal elections. Amman had hoped these would showcase Jordan's relatively advanced style of representative democracy in the Middle East. Instead, in a surprise development, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- the political party of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood -- withdrew hours into the voting, claiming that government-sponsored fraud had "overstepped the bounds." Subsequently, independent and progovernment candidates swept the elections.

The IAF's decision to withdraw and allegations of governmental foul play highlight the confrontational posture of the Islamists vis-a-vis the Jordanian royal palace. Regardless of what becomes of the IAF's election gambit, recent developments suggest that Jordanian Islamists have a newfound confidence. While Jordan is in no danger of an Islamist revolution, controlling Islamists remains a significant challenge for the kingdom.

Background

For nearly a decade, Jordan has held Islamists in check in parliamentary elections via a potent combination of gerrymandering -- the provision of more representation to pro-regime districts -- and a "one-man, one-vote system" in multiple-candidate districts that negatively impacts Islamist electoral performance (see [PolicyWatch no. 1098 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2463\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2463)). The Jordanian government has also tried to limit Islamist successes in municipal elections, via legislation that limited Jordanians' ability to select all their local representatives: until 2007, the government had appointed all mayors, and continues to appoint about half of all representatives and the mayor in Amman.

The IAF has long considered the national electoral system to be "undemocratic" and has boycotted several elections in protest of the legislative constraints, including most recently the 2003 municipal elections. Islamists participated in the 2003 parliamentary elections, however, and took 17 of 110 seats. Despite claims of government "harassment" leading up to the local voting, it appeared that the IAF was looking forward to the July 31 contest.

It's unclear how the IAF would have fared had it remained in the election. The Jordanian electorate is comprised of

nearly 60 percent Palestinians, who constitute a reservoir of support for the IAF. And, in recent years, the IAF has become increasingly close to Hamas, whose platform continues to resonate with a segment of the Jordanian population. Still, government regulations concerning districting and seat apportionment should have significantly circumscribed Islamist opportunity at the polls.

Last-Minute Withdrawal

Even prior to the elections, the Islamists accused the government of seven different "crimes" related to the voter registration process. The violations contained in a July 30 IAF press release mostly concerned voter registration and included (1) recording individuals more than once on the voter rolls in certain districts, (2) registering voters in more than one district, and (3) registering underage voters. The IAF appeared willing to accept these "crimes" and continue its participation, but then, on election day, the IAF charged the government with busing in plainclothes soldiers to cast ballots for non-Islamist candidates in several IAF strongholds, and abruptly withdrew its candidates.

Soldier voting is not a new phenomenon in Jordan, but in previous years the government did not actively assist soldiers in their efforts to vote. The military is mainly comprised of "East Banker" Jordanians, the segment of the population considered most loyal to the regime, so the addition of these forces could have significantly hurt the opposition, particularly if these troops were bused to targeted districts.

In announcing the IAF decision, IAF secretary-general Zaki Bani Irsheid called the elections a "democratic massacre" and hinted that the IAF would likely boycott the coming November national elections. For its part, the Jordanian government denied accusations of fraud, admitted transporting soldiers to the ballot boxes (Jordanian prime minister Maarouf Bakhit said wryly "It appears as though they [the IAF] wanted them to arrive on foot"), and declared the last-minute IAF pullout "illegal." He also described the withdrawal as "unpatriotic, conspiratorial and opportunistic." Government spokesman Naser Judeh went one step further, saying the Islamists "left the race because they felt their candidates were losing." With the exception of U.S. ambassador to Jordan David Hale's description of the elections as "free," Washington has made no official comment to date.

Assessment

It is unlikely that the true story of what happened will ever emerge. Of course, there is ample reason to doubt the veracity of Muslim Brotherhood claims. The IAF is trying to leverage liberal tools (elections) to achieve an illiberal goal (abrogation of the 1994 Wadi Araba peace treaty with Israel and implementation of sharia law). And, to achieve its political aims, the IAF is pressuring the Jordanian government to "reform" its election law to either: (1) increase the number of votes per district, or (2) implement a two-tiered voting system that includes "at-large" representatives such as the one that brought Hamas to power in the Palestinian Authority. The IAF is hoping to change the system prior to the November parliamentary elections.

But if even only a fraction of the IAF's allegations against the government were true, the implications would be troubling. Essentially, it would mean that even with the institutional advantage of determining the electoral and political parties' laws and controlling the apportionment of seats in each district, the kingdom still lacks confidence that it could forestall a significant Islamist victory.

The fact that the Islamists withdrew hours into the election also suggests that the IAF no longer feels compelled to demonstrate even a modicum of deference to the king. Its new confrontational politics coincide with the rise of the pro-Hamas wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, symbolized by the 2005 election of Irsheid as secretary-general. In this context, the boycott seems to demonstrate burgeoning Islamist confidence -- which does not bode well for the kingdom's relations with Jordanian Islamists.

Conclusion

The regional trend is not promising. In Egypt, where government repression of the Muslim Brotherhood is notoriously severe and elections are neither free nor fair, during the 2005 elections the Brotherhood captured 20 percent of parliamentary seats and control of 70 percent of all the districts in which they competed. In Jordan, where cooptation rather than confrontation has been the traditional dynamic, last week's municipal elections indicate that the IAF may no longer be willing to adhere to historical red lines.

Coming so close on the heels of Hamas's takeover of Gaza and the Islamist electoral victory in Turkey, the confrontation between the Jordanian royal palace and Islamists is cause for U.S. concern. Terrorism in the kingdom is on the rise; almost every day, the Jordanian press contains news of ongoing terrorism trials, interdictions of attacks, commutations of death sentences, or new arrests of Islamists in connection to terrorism. At the same time, the IAF appears to be increasingly confident in its political play.

The day after the IAF's withdrawal from the elections, an article in Jordan's paper of record, al-Ghad, stated that the IAF had "exploded a political bomb." In the run-up to the November parliamentary elections, as the IAF weighs the decision to boycott, shockwaves from this bomb will continue to reverberate throughout the kingdom. Meanwhile, King Abdullah faces what appears to be the unpalatable risk of either accepting a more potent Islamist political opposition or having a surface monopoly on power that encourages even more underground Islamist activity in the kingdom.

After the municipal balloting, IAF secretary-general Irsheid told reporters that it was the Jordanian government that had "lost in these elections." From a public relations perspective, he is right. For Amman and Washington, the challenge ahead is to ensure that this public relations success does not translate into a political victory. Given the regional trend, this will be no easy feat.

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