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Elections in Jordan: Poor Showing for Islamists

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During last month's elections in Jordan, the Islamists suffered an unprecedented defeat. Previously, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- Jordan's largest political party -- controlled an impressive bloc of 17 of 110 seats. But the IAF ran only twenty-two candidates in the latest contest and won just six seats. This stunning defeat has generated recrimination among the Islamists, providing insight into the internal politics of this secretive party. The following is an analysis of the dynamics within the IAF and Jordanian society that caused this electoral collapse, and the implications of these developments for the kingdom's Islamist trend.

Recent Relations between the Islamists and Amman

Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections energized Jordanian Islamists. Immediately following the Hamas triumph, Azzam al-Hneidi, head of the IAF bloc in parliament, announced that Jordanian Islamists were ready to assume power. This and similar statements from IAF leaders set off alarm bells, generating significant tension between the party and the monarchy. Authorities feared that the ties between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan would spill over and impact the IAF's conduct.

This tension has increased since the "Fourth Trend" -- the IAF's nickname for its faction of Hamas sympathizers -- took over the party's leadership in March 2006. This takeover was solidified by the election of Zaki Bani Irsheid -- an extremist known for his close ties with Hamas's political head Khaled Mashal -- as IAF secretary-general. Based on these ties, the Jordanian monarchy believes that Hamas controls the IAF. Not surprisingly, Jordan, which stood firmly against Hamas and Islamist extremism for years, perceived this development as a threat.

Although Irsheid was no doubt aware of these sensitivities, his conduct has not defused the situation. In fact, many in Jordan see him as a reckless leader who prioritizes links with Hamas over good relations with the state. As a result, the government has taken measures to restrict the IAF. In the July 2007 municipal elections, for example, the government was determined to forestall Islamist victories in major cities by encouraging the military to vote en masse against the Islamists. Some independent observers in Jordan even claimed that government-sponsored irregularities further undermined Islamist chances in the municipal contest.

Divisions Weaken the IAF at the Ballot Box

Against this backdrop, the Hamas faction within the IAF called for a boycott of the November parliamentary elections. This demand, however, placed Irsheid's supporters at loggerheads with the party's more moderate faction, which argued that a boycott would only undermine the IAF. This "dovish" faction -- which advocates Islamization of the kingdom as a long-term project -- has traditionally sought to avoid confrontation with the monarchy. The Hamas faction lost the debate, and the IAF agreed to participate in the elections.

Although the Hamas faction and the IAF "moderates" ostensibly agree on Islamist goals, their differences are more pronounced on foreign policy issues, the traditional preserve of the king. For instance, Irsheid wants the kingdom to pursue alliances with Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran instead of with the United States. The dovish

trend seeks to keep the same national reformist line, both on these alliances and issues related to internal reform.

Amid this unprecedented internal wrangling, the IAF entered the November elections with a list of twenty-two candidates. Once the Irsheid camp lost the battle on the boycott, it began a subtle campaign to undermine the party's more moderate candidates by asserting the existence of a deal between them and the government. This assertion discouraged many voters from turning out at the polls; given this internal disarray, a defeat was a foregone conclusion.

The IAF rationalized its defeat by accusing the government of vote rigging and fraud -- an assertion that may have an element of truth. After all, the government excluded the IAF from the Islamic Center Association, a key economic resource for the Muslim Brotherhood. Additionally, the government turned a blind eye when voters were transferred from one constituency to another in an attempt to support independent and tribal candidates. The practice of vote buying in Jordan may have also worked against Islamist candidates in some districts.

Even with these explanations, one cannot ignore the key role played by the party's internal battle. The divisions between hawkish and more moderate Islamist factions within the IAF has darkened the political atmosphere for Islamists in Jordan. Equally problematic for Islamists, the moderate candidates did not enjoy the support of the IAF leadership. Indeed, IAF declarations in the run-up to election implied that the leadership was seeking to distance itself from the list of candidates in the hope that they would fail miserably, potentially helping the Fourth Trend regain the initiative.

Implications for Islamists

Pundits in Jordan speculate that the future of the Islamist movement is on the line. Muhammad Abu Ruman, a top Jordanian expert on Islamists, made the case that the most important battle is yet to come. "The hawkish trend will feel that their opposition to participate in the election from the get-go is vindicated, and therefore they will try to sideline the moderates," he wrote in the Jordanian daily *al-Gahd* on November 22.

The Hamas camp will argue that the better option would have been either to boycott the elections or to put forward more effective and hawkish candidates. Indeed, they are already arguing that the moderate candidates fielded in the contest led to the IAF's colossal failure. Likewise, the moderates will find it difficult to defend their position, especially when accused of having made a deal with the government. The dual-track tactics by the Irsheid camp will leave the moderates in an uncomfortable position between the rock of the government and the hard place of the party's pro-Hamas leadership. The failure to chalk up a reasonable performance will undoubtedly shape the internal Islamist debate for some time to come. The IAF has never experienced this degree of fissure, and preparations are already underway for a tense battle for dominance.

It remains to be seen how the IAF will deal with its defeat, but clearly some soul searching would be appropriate. Although the monarchy helped fuel the current crisis, it did not lose this election for the IAF. Unbeknownst to the Islamists, the Jordanian people have changed. The public is gradually coming to resent the Islamists for their failure to present themselves as a proper, genuine, responsible political movement. Despite Islamist claims to the contrary, the electoral defeat should be taken as a symbol of their shattered popularity.

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