

Democratizing A Nation: When Push Comes To Shove

A great struggle for ideas is currently underway in Jordan. Into his eleventh year in power, His Majesty King Abdallah II and like-minded allies in the state and private sector, as well as many among the Jordanian intelligentsia, have recognized the need for an economic model capable of sustaining long-term growth. Yet, for the time being, progress towards reforming basic state and administrative practices shaping conditions for the economy remains sluggish. For all the talk of a new economic paradigm, a precarious balance is maintained between reformists on the one hand and conservatives who are more wary of change on the other. Nowhere was this more evident than in the latest political tug-of-war that saw the King dissolve the Lower House of Parliament, deeming it incapable of passing important economic laws close to the state's agenda. With much of parliament dominated by tribal groupings and business-minded deputies, priority, skeptics argue, has been given to the individual needs of their constituencies. This, of course, has sidelined more measured approaches, pushing the needs of the wider economy and the population at large onto the backburner.

While both the press and the public warmly welcomed the decision, a few questions remain notably unanswered. The first is whether this decision will have any questionable effects on the democratization of Jordan. Other things being equal, if parliament is representative of the democratic set up of the country, then why should a disagreement with House decisions lead to its dissolution?

The second question is whether the government will follow through on His Majesty's directives to amend the electoral law. In a letter to Prime Minister Nader Dahabi, the King wrote that the new law "should be a model of

transparency, fairness and integrity and a promising step in our process of reform and modernization, the aims of which are to achieve the best for our nation and to expand the horizon of progress and prosperity for Jordanians."

Not that this is anything new. Support for electoral reform in Jordan has been widespread but the process so far has been stymied by members of parliament (MPs) who would inevitably lose their seats (and power) as a result of the representational shift. As things stand today, the one-person, one-vote electoral system is perceived to be widely unrepresentative. What's more, key aspects of the system unlawfully discriminate against Islamists. For example, constituency boundaries favor tribal rural areas by assigning one MP to a population of a few thousand voters, whereas there are more than 90,000 voters for each MP in the traditionally more Islamist or liberal areas of Amman. The state's refusal to engage regularly with the Islamists has only polarized and complicated the situation. Indeed, acute discomfort particularly grew after the election of Hammam Said, an outspoken Hamas backer, as the Islamic Action Front's (IAF) new leader.

Oddly, with some luck and a bit of intelligent planning, this new shift in the country's political tide may prove a blessing in disguise for the IAF, which, amid allegations of vote-tampering, saw its representation in parliament cut from 17 seats in 2003, to only six today.

For the IAF, like other Islamic groups in the region, a constant dilemma has been whether to oppose the reformists and their pro-western agendas flat-out (without offering alternatives) or whether to lie low and be co-opted in the hopes of getting closer to power. Of course, there is always a third option: revert back to social action, as they have done successfully in the past. Whatever the case, the IAF must view the new



elections as a golden opportunity to regroup. After all, blaming its woes on electoral fraud or an unfavorable electoral system is as surprising an accusation as stale bread. Instead, emphasis should be placed on producing an economic growth strategy and delivering on it. Only then will the IAF play its full part in Jordanian political rebalancing.

Unintentionally, but nonetheless significantly, many of this month's stories unite under the banner of "construction": how we construct our past, present and future. As far as cover stories go, the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty signed off at Wadi Arabi 15 years ago is retrospectively deconstructed by those who played an important part in its inauspicious construction (page 36). Green construction, on the other hand, brings out the ever-increasing imperative of seeking out environmentally-friendly solutions to sustainable dwelling (page 61). We look at more construction, this time through the eye of a lens: barriers built to separate people and sanitize ideologies (page 85). Finally, Microsoft's Kevin Turner outlines the vision that the new Windows 7 hopes to turn into a reality with individual and corporate PC users at the launch of the software giant's latest product offering (page 72).

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