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Jordan Chooses Stability

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On September 20, 2016, Jordan held elections for its eighteenth parliament. That same day, King Abdullah II delivered his address at the United Nations General Assembly, praising his people for actively participating in a democratic process. Given the blood-soaked civil wars in neighboring Iraq and Syria and the freeze on both the internal process in Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian political process, the king has every right to be proud of his nation holding elections. They were transparent for the most part, supervised by more than one hundred European Union and other observers. Although one district required a second round of voting, Jordan emerged from the election as an island of stability in a seething Middle Eastern sea, a nation successfully overcoming internal difficulties that have worsened because of the humanitarian and political chaos plaguing the region.

By absenting himself from Jordan on election day, the king bowed to an international schedule he had no ability to change. Doing so, however, also signaled his confidence that the Jordanian voters would not opt for any major surprises liable to upset the balance of power between the monarchy and the executive and legislative bodies. This balance underwent a minor change in Jordan's constitution in 2012 as a result of the Arab Spring; accordingly, the king retains his authority and control of the national agenda. While the outgoing parliament was louder and more confrontational on some issues such as Israeli-Jordanian relations than its predecessors, its actual influence on this and other issues was marginal.

The Muslim Brotherhood, or more precisely the Islamic Action Front, the political party representing the Brotherhood in Jordan, commanded much attention. In 2010 and 2013, the party boycotted the entire electoral process, largely because of the advice it received from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Since then, the movement in Jordan has experienced a change in leadership and an ideological softening, both of which led to a shift in its position on the election. The movement ran candidates in many electoral regions, especially in the capital, where candidates joined forces with others under an umbrella group called the National Coalition for Reform. Thus, candidates ran in the electoral regions of Zarka, Jarash, and the Palestinian refugee camps; returns showed their very partial and limited success. Before the election, one of the Muslim Brotherhood heads in Jordan predicted that the bloc would win 15-20 seats in parliament, especially from voters in Amman (i.e., 10-15 percent of the population). After the

results were released, speakers for the movement did in fact boast that they had won 15 seats, but one-third of them were guaranteed by law to women, Christians, and the Circassian community, the other coalition partners. Given the outcome, it would be more accurate to say that in Amman, the refugee camps, Zarka, and Irbid, there is support for the Muslim Brotherhood, but if one takes into account the low voting rates and assumes they equally affected all political parties, one can say with a degree of certainty that in Jordan, the Brotherhood is not a decisive political power.

Apparently the Muslim Brotherhood has managed to recover only partially both from the strategic decision it made in 2010 and 2013 to boycott the election, and from the ramifications of its ties to the Egyptian movement toppled after only a year in power and now hounded by the current Egyptian regime. Another reason for the modest success of the Muslim Brotherhood may lie in the loathing and fear of the Islamic State on the part of most of the older Jordanian voters (although hundreds of Jordanians have joined the ranks of the Islamic State), which grew stronger following the January 2015 brutal murder of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, held captive in the part of Syria controlled by the Islamic State. Furthermore, the internal split in the movement has weakened it. Two movements – the Association of the Muslim Brotherhood, recognized by the Jordanian government, and the Zamzam Initiative – broke off and ran independently in this parliamentary election.

Yet an election is not the only measure of the influence wielded by the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology or of the popularity of the Islamic State. High unemployment among the young, especially the university educated, creates fertile ground for movements with an Islamic orientation. The Jordanian government, with US encouragement, is trying to control – with only partial success – the influence of pirate, unrecognized, and unapproved mosques. Echoes of the regime's rising concerns could be heard in the king's address to the UN General Assembly, dedicated mainly to Islam and the perverse image the Islamic State and similar organizations project for it. In this sense, the changes that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood made to its leadership, its relations with the Egyptian mother group, and its attitude toward Jordan's internal political system, could serve as a bridge toward dialogue with the Jordanian sovereign.

Despite important and positive changes instituted since 2012, the Jordanian parliamentary election system still gives numerical preference to candidates running on slates with a local character compared to those running on national lists. In all, 226 lists were approved by the Independent Election Council. Only a minority ran in more than one population center, a fact indicative of separatism and a focus on local issues. It would seem that the composition of a parliament with a local orientation would make it easier for the government to resist parliamentary pressures and serve the regime, which would not have to confront strong parliamentary blocs with a national agenda. On the one hand, the combination of the constitution and the election law has made it relatively easy for the Hashemite regime to weather the years since the Arab Spring with some measure of peace and quiet. On the other hand, the public

discourse about the precise function of the parliament and its role vis-à-vis the executive – beyond the formal definition in the constitution – is quite vibrant. At this stage, the regime has passed the hurdles posed by the social and political awakening of the Arab Spring with success, but it must remain attentive to the public mood reflected in the public discourse.

During the parliament's new term, Jordan will continue to face significant existential challenges. Some of them may have legal significance, such as: the war on terrorism; the enlistment by Jordanian citizens in Salafist jihadist organizations; their involvement in terrorism across Jordan's borders; and the status of the Syrian refugees in Jordan and their civil and economic rights. These questions will arise with greater urgency than before, and could come to rest at the parliament's doorstep. The test of this parliament will be its ability to answer them with the requisite degree of national responsibility.

Furthermore, the question of the parliament's involvement in foreign affairs, in particular Jordanian-Israeli relations, can be expected to resurface. Since the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, the Jordanian parliament has served as a forum for lambasting Israel, opposing processes of normalization, and criticizing the Jordanian government for not severing the bilateral relations. The return to the parliament provides the Muslim Brotherhood with a readymade platform to attack the government along the lines of an issue shared with many partners in other political parties. At the same time, the political alliance between the Christian and Circassian communities in Jordan and the Muslim Brotherhood, in its new and less rough-edged form, creates interesting possibilities from Israel's perspective, as Israel has a parallel communities maintaining widespread connections with their brethren in Jordan.

Finally, the previous Jordanian parliament was not a key player in Jordan's political, economic, or social theaters. However, a new parliament will soon take office under new regional circumstances, and it may have to take some serious decisions with long term implications. Perhaps the status of the parliament will then change in the eyes of the 60 percent of the Jordanian electorate that in 2016 stayed at home, indifferent to the election and its consequences.