

March 2022

Islamists' Boycott of Local Elections: Sending Messages and Saving Face

Suha Ma'ayeh

This article discusses the Islamists move to sit out the upcoming municipal elections and if they can afford to be politically disengaged in the long term. While the Muslim Brotherhood has already been weakened, they are trying to use the boycott to express their discontent with the political process and avoid becoming further marginalized.

Background

Jordan will hold its local elections on March 22nd, 2022, in a vote that has so far sparked little interest among eligible voters and amidst a boycott by the country's main opposition group, the Islamic Action Front. The elections will take place months after parliament approved constitutional amendments intended to reinvigorate political life. But some were dismissed by critics as having further consolidated the King's powers.

The voting is occurring against a backdrop of rising public discontent over corruption, economic hardships, rising poverty and unemployment, growing income disparities between urban and rural areas, a crackdown on dissent and declining public trust in the state institutions. Those reasons have already soured the mood ahead of the upcoming municipal elections. As seen in a study conducted by Hayat for Civil Society Development (RASED), a Jordanian NGO that monitors elections, showed only 23.3 percent of voters are willing to cast

their ballots, with 30.4 per cent of those surveyed saying they do not believe that the elected councils would be effective.¹

Across the country, 4.794 candidates are competing for governorate council, municipal and executive council seats. Winning candidates are expected to address pressing issues for citizen's eager to see an improvement in basic services such as electricity, water and better roads. The elections will be held under the Local Administration Law, which went into effect last year. The law seeks to improve governance at the local level and to enhance citizen's role in the decision-making process. The elections serve as a testing ground as to whether the government is willing to further decentralize power including providing municipalities with fiscal autonomy.

Despite the somber election mood, Tawfiq Kreishan, the Minister of Local Administration, described the vote as a significant step in the country's march toward democracy: "We want the elections to represent all segments of society in the governorate or in the municipality so that the councils will determine the needs and priorities [of citizens] in a fair and comprehensive manner", he said during a press conference held in February. "The ballots are one of the stepping-stones towards reforms and involve citizens' participation in the decision-making process".

Islamists' Boycott: Political Gains of Saving Face

The Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, announced in January 2022, that it would not run in the local elections as a result of its increasing frustrations with the political process. However, it is not uncommon for the Islamists to

¹ <https://www.almamlakatv.com/news/86932-راصد-232-من-الأردنيين-والأردنيات-ينون-المشاركة-في-الانتخابات-المقيلة-86932>; Also see [Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung - Foundation Office Jordan - Municipal Elections 2022 | Pre-Election Survey \(kas.de\)](#)

boycott or withdraw from elections, as their ties with the government ebbed and flowed over the years.

At face value, a boycott by the Islamic opposition could embarrass Amman as it embarked on an ambitious reform drive that would supposedly lead to a parliamentary government in a decade. But for the Islamists, the measure could be part of a pre-emptive attempt to save face as they are becoming increasingly marginalized, locally and regionally. Nonetheless, they could also be using the boycott to pitch themselves as reform torchbearers at a time their popularity has been gradually receding.

The Islamist's Position

The IAF cited the repressive atmosphere and concerns about election foul play in the country as the main reasons behind its decision to boycott the upcoming elections. It said the government's "negative practices" and the "restrictive environment" are not conducive for political participation, according to a statement posted on the Islamic party's website.² Murad Adaileh, the IAF's Secretary General, said the decision is based on precedents and fears that a "manipulation of the electoral results" could lead to minimal gains for the Islamic party.

"It is pointless to take part in the municipal elections since there are no guarantees that they are going to be fair. Why should we run if the results are going to be determined beforehand? This will not reflect well on us. Besides, the political scene does not encourage political participation and the policies adopted against Islamists are intended to exclude them from the political process".³

Despite its strained ties with the government, the IAF participated in the parliamentary elections in 2020. But the Islamic-Led National Alliance for Reform (the IAF and its

² <https://jabha-jo.com/العمل-الاسلامي-يعطن-تعليق-مشاركتهمفي/>.

³ Interview with Murad Adaileh, the IAF's Secretary General, February 14, 2022.

independent allies) lost nearly half of its seats, securing only eight in the 130-member parliament, down from 15.⁴ However, their participation helped them maintain a political presence and at the same time lent legitimacy to the electoral process.

But the IAF boycotted parliamentary elections in 1997, 2010 and 2013, citing vote rigging and electoral laws that discriminated against them. Moreover, that had previously withdrawn abruptly from the municipal elections in 2007 in protest against what they called voting irregularities. But a decade later, they participated in the municipal elections and made significant gains.

Three Islamists became mayors, including one in Zarqa, Jordan's third most populated governorate.⁵ However, Ali Abu Sukkar, who became the mayor of Zarqa, resigned in April 2019, citing health reasons.⁶ An IAF official said Abu Sukkar also faced pressures which in part prompted him to step down.

“The government is not keen on having Islamists in the municipalities because it does not want them to be involved in the delivery of services that touch on the day-to-day life of Jordanians”, said Ibrahim Gharaibeh, a researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. “The government doesn't want any competition”.⁷

Most recently, the Islamists pulled out from the Jordan Engineer Association (JEA) elections after they accused “the security agencies and the government” of meddling in the electoral process in an unprecedented manner.⁸ Yet, some analysts disputed the Islamists' argument

⁴<https://www.kas.de/documents/279984/280033/Elections+Article.pdf/4504ba80-43e8-1e18-c5ef-0fd525b30e01?version=1.2&t=1614079882642>.

⁵<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/jordan-local-elections-provide-testing-ground-for-muslim-brotherhood-1.620384>.

⁶ https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=14534&lang=en&name=en_news.

⁷ Interview with Ibrahim Gharaibeh, researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, March 3, 2022.

⁸ Interview with Badi Rafayah, a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood and activist at the Jordan Engineers Association.

and said that they decided to withdraw after they failed to garner sufficient votes based on their predictions and therefore they wanted to prevent an impending loss. After all, the election results showed that *Numou list*, which is a coalition of leftists, independents and nationalists, made a sweeping victory in the JEA councils in the provincial branches, while the Islamists and their allies lost.⁹ They were also defeated in Zarqa, which is considered a stronghold for the Muslim Brotherhood.

“It is not uncommon for the government to intervene in the elections. Still, the recent elections indicate that the Muslim Brotherhood realized that they have lost their luster and that’s why they decided to withdraw”.¹⁰

So they seem to be using the boycott to send a message to the government stating that they are not happy with the status quo. However, prior to their decision to boycott the municipal elections, they participated in a 92-member handpicked royal committee created last October with a mandate to modernize the political party and election laws.

In January, the parliament approved a slew of laws and constitutional amendments proposed by the committee, including others put forth by the government. These entailed the creation of a National Security Council, which bolstered the King’s powers over foreign policy and security matters. According to a report published in the Project on Middle East for Democracy, the government has mitigated some of the democratic reforms by introducing its own constitutional amendments.¹¹ The amendments dampened speculations for moving the country towards democracy. “If the amendments were intended to restore confidence in the state’s institutions, in this case they have failed to serve their purpose,” Adaileh said,

⁹ alrai.com (alrai.com) نمو « تكتسح انتخابات «المهندسين» و «البيضاء» تخسر جولة الفروع | صحيفة الرأي »

¹⁰ Interview with Mohammad Sweidan, journalist and expert on Professional Associations, March 3, 2021.

¹¹ <https://pomed.org/report-democratic-reform-in-jordan-breaking-the-impasse/>.

“People do not see a breakthrough on the horizon. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a setback which has deepened frustrations.”

Repercussion of the Boycott

In response to these developments, some analysts argue that an Islamists' boycott may hardly have an impact on the elections given that Jordanians, by and large, have already lost faith in the political process itself. Besides, they say the Islamists themselves are no longer seen as a genuine opposition which assumes the role of a watchdog over the government conduct. They say the Islamists' agendas are motivated by personal interests and often oscillate between pragmatism and opportunism, depending on the circumstances.

“Their decision to boycott or participate in the elections is based on their own calculations,” said Basil Akour, the publisher of Jo24 Website.

“Their move will not deal a blow to the credibility of the elections. It will have zero impact. Previously, Jordanians considered them as an influential opposition. Whenever the Islamists questioned the integrity of the elections or decided not to run, they had an influence on the voter turnout and they were able to undermine the legitimacy of the elections. However, they are no longer seen as a watchdog over government conduct. They strike backroom deals with the government and when they reach positions of power, their ability to affect change is limited”.¹²

Typically, local elections in Jordan lack political flavor. This time only 74 candidates with a party affiliation representing 24 political parties will take part in the elections (there are 55 political parties in the country).¹³

¹² Interview with Basil Akour, publisher of Jo24 Website, February 15

¹³ <https://alghad.com/31-انتخابات-البلديات-لانتخابات-شحن-حزب-بلا-متر-شحن-لانتخابات-البلديات-31>.

“Since most political parties are not running for local elections, the Islamist’s boycott will not make a difference on the outcome of the vote”, said Oraib Al-Rantawi, the founder and director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies.¹⁴ “But the Islamists are using the boycott to relay a message to the government expressing their discontent with the constitutional amendments, particularly the ones put forth by the government. However, their message fell on deaf ears and their ties with the government have become strained”.

Conclusion and Outlook

The decision to boycott the upcoming elections indicates that Jordan’s Islamists have been weakened, primarily due to internal rifts and government policies. For a long time, the Muslim Brotherhood were well tolerated in the country and worked in cahoots with the state against the rising tide of leftist and nationalist groups. However, recent years have shown that as they became a potent political force, the authorities increasingly became wary of the rising tide of Islamists. Those fears intensified particularly during the Arab Spring, after the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt rose to power in 2012.

While internationally they came to be seen as a conveyor belt to extremism, regional actors such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE classified the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Jordan, however, did not follow suit, despite viewing the group as a threat to its stability. Instead, the government pursued a patient strategy to strip the Muslim Brotherhood from its legal and political legitimacy, thereby deepening the rifts within the movement, according to Hasan Abu Hanieh, an expert on Islamic groups.¹⁵

In spite of these pushbacks, the Islamists continue to possess a popular base of support especially in Amman and Zarqa, traditional strongholds for the Muslim Brotherhood.

¹⁴ Interview with Oraib Al-Rantawi, the founder and director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, February 14, 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with Hasan Abu Hanieh, an expert on Islamic groups, February 23, 2022.

“Despite the blows they received, they still can mobilize support for elections. But the boycott of local elections serves them well. It is an effort to show that they are committed to democratic reforms and at the same time they will avoid unfavorable election results. They want to save face. However, it is difficult to gauge their actual strength since most elections are marred by voting irregularities”.¹⁶

In summary we can say, that it is not uncommon for the Islamists to use election boycotts as a tool to advance their political gains. However, it is unlikely that they will choose to be politically disengaged in the long term. After all, as the Muslim Brotherhood is witnessing a setback, their priority is to maintain their political relevance.

For now, they will adopt a wait and see approach. They hope that the mounting public discontent will pressure the government to change its attitude towards them and perhaps prompt it to strike deals that would help them reap political advantages. However, they may aspire to increase their representation in the next parliament, particularly after the recent amendments to the election and political party laws.

Meanwhile, the government is sending mixed signals. While, its rhetoric is focused on political reforms, it is cracking down on activists and moving further to weaken the Islamists. Yet, the pressure for genuine political reforms, both externally and internally remains weak. Therefore, the government does not feel it needs to act with a sense of urgency to push for democracy and wider representation. After all, the Islamists are weak, the protest movement failed to evolve into a critical mass and the parliament is toothless. So for now, it remains to be seen if the government will match its rhetoric of reform with action.

¹⁶ Interview with Hasan Abu Hanieh, an expert on Islamic groups, February 23, 2022.

Suha Ma'ayeh is a freelance journalist and researcher based in Amman. She has written extensively on domestic politics, Arab spring protests, foreign affairs, terrorism, elections, and corruption, including the crisis in southern Syria and the influx of refugees. Her work has been published in *The National*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Disclaimer

The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the KAS Jordan office.

Reproduction is authorized provided the source is acknowledged.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.
Foundation Office Jordan
23, Isma'eel Haqqi Abdoh Street, Sweifieh
11183 Amman, Jordan
info.jordan@kas.de

Dr. Edmund Ratka
Resident Representative



Der Text dieses Werkes ist lizenziert unter den Bedingungen von „Creative Commons Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 international“, CC BY-SA 4.0 (abrufbar unter: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode.de>)