

The scene was suspicious but not surprising. Buses filled with men — known to many as soldiers despite their plain clothes — were moving from one election center to another. Nobody could prove a thing, but the results of the November 2007 parliamentary elections came as a shock to several stakeholders, especially the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the largest opposition group. The IAF saw its number of seats in the Lower House drop from 17 to six, with seemingly undefeatable candidates losing to more “pro-government” candidates.

The IAF cried foul and the government rejoiced, announcing that the toughest opposition group, which virtually controlled the streets, was losing ground because it was no longer able to market its slogans to average citizens.

Rights groups, including the government-founded National Centre for Human Rights, had their “observations,” but political analyst and columnist Jihad Momani said there is a big difference between mere observations and solid evidence that the vote was rigged.

“Everybody knows that the Islamists have lost part of their popularity. Their claims of vote rigging did not go further than politically motivated, hard-to-prove allegations,” Momani said, admitting that the public was not happy with the makeup of the new Lower House.

“Those who contested the results of the parliamentary polls had a good chance to go to court, but none did,” he said. “They could not have proved anything.”

The “troops buses,” as they were commonly called, were not a myth during the June 2007 municipal elections. The government said simply that army personnel were eligible to vote in local elections and that their headquarters had secured them a ride from their units to the polling centers and back .

Summing up the people’s reaction to the outcome of the parliamentary vote, Momani said opinion leaders, intellectuals and the media “are not satisfied with the makeup of the legislature. Regarding average people, yes, there are doubts over the legitimacy of the House ... However, public opinion is not enough in itself to issue a guilty verdict (against authorities).”

A Western diplomat, who asked to not be indentified and who personally observed multiple polling stations, was more blatant. “The government did not even bother to cover its tracks when tens of buses were mobilized to vote in Irbid,” a stronghold for the Islamist movement 60 kilometers north of Amman.

Anti-Corruption Commission Success?

When the members of the Anti-Corruption Commission were handpicked by King Abdullah in 2007, a wave of relief and hope rippled through the nation. However, few believed any such panel, albeit with wide authority, could eliminate deeply rooted phenomena like *wasta* (connections), nepotism and favoritism, which still plague the country and remain an inherent part of the popular culture.

The Anti-Corruption Commission was formed under a special law in 2006 and went into effect in late 2007. Chief Commissioner Abd Shkhanbeh announced recently that since its inception, the commission has referred 21 cases to court.

According to Member of Parliament (MP) Reem Qassem, who is one of six female deputies in the Lower House, the figure is stunning for two reasons. The first is the commission's ability to detect such a relatively high number of corruption cases, and second is the magnitude of corruption in the official apparatus.

"It is an achievement indeed, a very good start," Qassem said. "Yet it is sad that we have such a number of suspicious cases in such a short time."

Several suspected multi-million-dollar corruption cases involving current and former senior government officials, such as the Dead Sea Casino case, have been brushed under the carpet, say activists.

Is *Wasta* Incurable?

Two years after the establishment of a panel to tackle financial and administrative corruption, ordinary citizens still tell the same old stories of bloated *wasta*.

Mohammad Jibril (not his actual name) said he graduated five years ago and has applied for jobs at state-owned companies but has been a victim of *wasta*, because he did not have the necessary connections to secure a job.

Suheir Ahmad (not her actual name because she fears retribution) said she has been a victim of nepotism. Ahmad, a government official, said she was deprived from her right to participate in three training workshops, including two abroad, because her seniors sent their relatives and acquaintances instead of her.

According to Qassem, *wasta*, favoritism and nepotism are the most common forms of corruption in Jordan.

Jordanian society is comprised of a nearly 40/60 mix of well-connected native Jordanians and Palestinian immigrants, who have been naturalized and given citizenship. The society's tribal nature is a key reason why optimism is the wrong choice when it comes to analyzing the *wasta* phenomenon.

Tribal relations and blood ties are sacred in this conservative society. The unwritten law is that an official is obliged to help his relatives and would be shamed if he does not take the expectations of his relatives seriously. Therefore, despite all the claims of transparency in public job recruitment procedures, one can find a large number of employees from the same tribe or government agency who are all related to the head of that department. This has made young people like Jibril so frustrated that there are concerns about the safety and security of the community, especially since extremism feeds on social injustice.

Foreign Investors and Business

Hussein Abbadi, an investor in hospitality, said new legislation to promote investments helped speed up the process of establishing businesses. However, *Al-Arab Al-Yawm* columnist Salameh Diraawi says certain influential figures outside the government make direct contacts with foreign investors and bypass all procedures to make personal financial gains.

Diraawi called for updating investment and economic laws in a way that ensures harmony and gives the executive power the sole authority to deal with internal and incoming investments.

Access to Information Remains Difficult

In July 2007, Jordan endorsed the long-awaited Access to Information Law, which stipulates that officials are obliged to ensure citizens' rights to obtain the information they seek without delay. However, the same law relies on restrictions set in place by another piece of legislation, the Protection of State Documents and Secrets Law.

According to Mohammad Qteishat, an activist and one of the country's few lawyers specializing in media legislation, the link between the two laws has made things worse.

The National Information Council has not registered a single complaint since it was established under the law early this year, Qteishat said, yet "there are indications that there has been a decline in the ability of journalists to access information. In my opinion, as an expert in media laws, the new law is just another barrier facing journalists seeking information from government agencies."



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