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Birthing pains of democratic politics in Jordan



After months of consultations a new government, which has been melded together with the old government, has finally received the vote of confidence in Jordan.

The 82 for, 66 against, vote from parliament gives Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour's second government the confidence to carry out its program, which includes removing subsidies on electricity tariffs and dealing with the explosive Syrian file.

However, the most important reform issue, the Elections Law, has failed to garner much interest in the new parliament's first months on the job, which clearly indicates that we will not see a new law during this parliament's term.

A pressing question

One more immediate question, however, is whether parliamentarians will be able to hold cabinet posts. The issue was deferred during the discussions Ensour held with MPs, despite the premier's public promises that parliamentarians will become ministers within the year.

The issue of a parliamentary government, which is the goal of reformers, has yet to be fully addressed. The absence of serious political parties has proved to be one of the biggest stumbling blocks. For decades, political party activists failed to garner enough grassroots support to have an impact.

University students could not enroll in political parties and the latter did not quite enjoy freedom of action and movement.

Furthermore they failed to capture the imagination of the population. Party activists consider the election and other related laws to be the main obstacle to fostering a culture of political parties.

The most recent elections saw the beginnings of a change towards including political parties in Jordan's political scene, with the law introducing 27 parliamentary seats voted on the basis of national parties and lists.

The strength of political parties, however, was diluted when the new Elections Law allowed newly established groupings, and not just parties, to compete for those nationwide seats and failed to implement a higher threshold. As a result, the 27 seats were occupied by 17 different parties and groupings, many with just one member making it to parliament.

Jordan's attempts to deal with the issue of parliamentary government have to be evaluated. It is true that parliamentarians were consulted by the chief of the Royal Court before a prime minister was chosen. It is also true that the newly chosen prime minister also consulted members of parliament before establishing his government and designing its program. However, members of Parliament publicly criticized the process as a mere ritual.

They say that during the consultation process, the heads of parliamentary blocs were given a narrow list of individuals to choose from and they chose Ensour because he was the best of the available choices.

They also say that, while the prime minister listened to their requests regarding the government program and its members, he eventually did what he wanted, leaving them in a difficult position.

Another issue that was not clearly settled is whether MPs could become prime ministers or members of the cabinet.

Experience needed

Ensour's delay tactic seems to be based on the absence of a more politically mature parliament that can deal with the conflict of interest that would arise if members of the legislative branch become part of the executive. In his third discussion paper, the king deals with this issue by calling for a revamping of the internal by-laws of the House of Representatives and the need for MPs to have to sign some kind of code of ethics that will ensure the separation of powers.

Tuesday's confidence vote has shown that the reform process still needs experience. Members of the same bloc, in fact members of the same political list and party, were split down the middle in their votes, leaving the Jordanian public with the feeling that the political culture in parliament is immature.

If a political party, or list, or bloc is unable to mobilize its members into voting a particular way during the crucial vote of confidence, how can it be trusted to forge ahead with a clear political program?

Still, the situation is not that bad. When the new Elections Law was enacted, few understood the intricacies of the different ways in which a parliamentary system should work. The political elite, however, quickly learned, throughout the election process, how the new law works, what its loopholes are and how to tackle them when the time comes.

The same probably applies to the workings of the parliament itself, whose by-laws, all agree, are in bad need of reform.

The current process has been a great learning curve for politicians, activists and the public at large. Reform will evolve over the coming months and years. The only question that remains to be answered is whether the country has the luxury of waiting until the political class grasps the basic lessons of democracy and parliamentary governments.

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