

Wednesday, 17 April 2013

Security woes vs. reform in Jordan



Torn between reform and security, Jordan's long-awaited parliamentary government, or "pseudo-parliamentary government," has entered the post-Arab Spring Lower House with a traditionally-worded policy statement. The statement requests a vote of confidence from deputies who are already unhappy with its formation.

In a complete surprise for the reform-starved Jordanians, the government of Jordan's strongman, Abdullah Ensour –the disliked yet un-abhorred premier –has come up with no exceptionalities in its policy statement except for the somewhat similar promises –if not clichés - of preceding governments. This leaves the promises of reforms unfulfilled.

There emerged recently talk inside the Parliament about several deputies' intention to cast a "nay" vote for Ensour's government, whose make-up was certainly not the outcome of consultations with MPs as promised. However, such a move is not expected from the newly-elected lawmakers for several reasons –paramount of which is probably their disinclination to complicate the already-marred political situation in Jordan. The Lower House denying governments a vote of confidence, and thus compelling prime ministers to resign or impose a reshuffle, is a rare thing in Jordan. It has occurred only three times over the past 70 years.

Although deliberations over the government's policy statement are expected to witness harsh criticism of Ensour's Cabinet and its make-up, deputies are expected to pass the vote of confidence, knowing that the country is going through exceptional security challenges that require restraint and reason.

The government's formation

Ensour's government, which promised to be Jordan's first parliamentary government in decades, was formed in the same traditional manner all previous governments were formed, there was nothing exceptional about its creation at all.

In politics, a parliamentary government is one that is formed by a political party or a coalition of parties winning the majority of seats in parliament, or one including MPs or, as promised in Jordan, one that is put together based on the premier's consultations with the Lower House.

But none of the above has happened in Jordan, not even the third scenario. Ensour, as instructed by King Abdullah, entered marathon consultations with individual MPs and parliamentary blocs but finally, and surprisingly, came up with a cabinet excluding all names they recommended and including some others they opposed.

'Pseudo-parliamentary government'

It is a "pseudo-parliamentary government." Ensour, the controversial premier, is disliked by many Jordanians for increasing fuel prices while being respected by others for taking daring and brave economic decisions. He has promised to include MPs in his government at a later date.

Ensour, the veteran statesman and former outspoken lawmaker, has said that his decision to exclude deputies from his government was made due to concerns that giving ministerial positions to newly-elected MPs, "whom he does not know very well," would fail the parliamentary government.

"After knowing the capabilities of deputies, I will split up some of the merged ministries to give them ministerial posts later," Ensour said.

For the first time in decades, the government in Jordan is made up of only 18 ministers, with some of them given more than one portfolio.

The Jordanian government, for many deputies and observers, has failed to seize the historic moment provided by the Arab Spring. Jordan, for such observers, failed to achieve real and promising reforms and ended up staying very traditional as if nothing happened.

Although more was expected, it was a good start for many others who believe that Jordan, a country moving gradually towards democratization and reform and surrounded by turbulence, has achieved considerable progress to build upon in the future.

Reform vs. security

It seems that security is now the government's, deputies' and political powers' major concern in Jordan. For many, talk about reforms has become a "luxury." That is a logical and realistic attitude to a great extent.

Jordan, anxious over the effect of the escalating violence in the neighboring Syria and the influx of Syrian refugees, has reset its priorities, notably becoming more cautious and giving priority to security

Remarkably, the government of Jordan has shifted its focus from reform-oriented matters to security and stability-related issues. The same can be said about MPs who, as representatives of the people, know that the security of the kingdom, that is weathering the region's political turbulence, is Jordanians' major concern. These MPs have also stopped pressing for reforms –at least for a while –calling instead for giving priority to security over all other issues.

Jordanians, political parties and opposition powers too have shifted their priorities to the country's security.

Jordan, which witnessed around 60,000 demonstrations, rallies, protests and sits-in over the past two years calling for reforms, especially on Fridays, is now "quiet" with only very few protests in small numbers organized here and there. That is all primarily due to Jordanians' rising concerns over the security of their refugee-plagued country. Jordan's government, being busy with security-related matters- mainly the ongoing violence in Syria and its effect on Jordan- has placed security on the top of its agenda and does not seem to care much about a marginal issue like the vote of confidence.

Likewise, MPs, beset by concerns regarding their country's security, are not expected to escalate the already-boiling situation and turn down the government's request of confidence.

It seems that Jordanians have lost interest, probably as a result of their growing security concern and their weariness of officials' unfulfilled promises of reforms.

Raed Omari is a Jordanian journalist, political analyst, parliamentary affairs expert, and commentator on local and regional political affairs. His writing focuses on the Arab Spring, press freedoms, Islamist groups, emerging economies, climate change, natural disasters, agriculture, the environment and social media. He is a writer for The Jordan Times, and contributes to Al Arabiya English. He can be reached via raed_omari1977@yahoo.com, or on Twitter @RaedAlOmari2