
The Shubeilat Case

Jordan government's conundrum deepens

by Our Special Correspondent

When the government of Prime Minister Zaid Ben Shagr threw Laith Shubeilat into prison last December, on charges of lèse-majesté and undermining confidence in Jordan's currency and economy, it thought it was decapitating the informal opposition in the country. Shubeilat, who had been outspoken in his public criticism of King Hussein's fast-track normalization with Israel, and of the country's acquiescence to the economic policy dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), had enjoyed widespread popular support. The Jordanian Engineers Association (JEA), the most powerful of the dozen professional unions in Jordan, had backed him fully, particularly in his demands to protect the national economy and sovereignty from IMF intrusions. Broad public support had been expressed particularly for Shubeilat's insistence, that Jordan should defend its neighbor and Arab ally, Iraq, rather than scheme toward a change in government in Baghdad, as King Hussein appeared to be doing. Shubeilat had become a thorn in the side of the establishment. Putting him in prison was seen as a way of plucking out the thorn.

The operation, however, has left a festering sore. While in prison, stripped of his basic rights to decent conditions and fair treatment, Shubeilat was listed as a candidate for reelection as president of the JEA, and on Feb. 17, won hands down. The 81% majority given him was immediately read as a mandate for him, implicitly against the policies of the king. At the end of February, Shubeilat was reported to be considering running as a candidate for Parliament, in a special by-election to be held in April, for a seat recently vacated in the city of Salt. It is widely expected that, were he to run, he would win by a landslide. When Shubeilat first ran for Parliament in 1989 as an independent Islamist, he received the highest number of votes given anyone.

Authorities at a loss

Faced with this embarrassing show of support for a man whom the authorities are painting as a criminal, and as the "anti-King," they seem to be at a loss, as to what course to pursue. If Shubeilat is condemned by the military court, he will become a martyr in the eyes of most Jordanians. If he

is released, he will be seen as victorious in a political controversy over the central policy issues of the country.

In court, therefore, the prosecution's tactic has been simply to stall. In session after session, the court has convened, only to be adjourned after ten minutes. After the prosecution had rested its case, the defense presented a list of 59 witnesses. The court rejected the list outright,

on grounds that the proposed witnesses would "politicize" the trial. Among the witnesses proposed, were Shubeilat's wife, the prosecutor who had conducted the search operations at the defendant's home and office (without a warrant), several members of Parliament, prominent professionals, doctors, engineers, and others, who had attended the public speech delivered in Irbid by Shubeilat, which contained the allegedly incriminating statements. After the list was rejected, the case adjourned.

As for the government, the situation is more complex. The government which arrested Shubeilat, led by Ben Shagr, was reshuffled in early February. Anyone associated with hesitations regarding the pace of normalization with Israel was sacked, including even Ben Shagr himself, a cousin of the king. The new cabinet is composed of persons noted for their intransigent rejection of the opposition Islamist current in the Parliament. Thus, the new cabinet should be hostile to Shubeilat's case, and favor his rapid conviction.

Yet, at the same time, this government is striving to win favor with a skeptical population, and the new prime minister, Abdul Karim Al Kabariti, has promised "change," including on the human rights plane. The previous government has been accused of having lied to the public, by denying the existence of political detainees. The new government, by releasing some 250 detainees, seems to have confirmed those accusations. By the same token, the Kabariti cabinet could easily wash its hands of the Shubeilat case, arguing that the man had been arrested by a previous regime. Rumors have in fact circulated in Jordan, that the government approached Shubeilat, offering him some sort of deal. The same rumors have it that Shubeilat refused. This government *could* curry favor with Jordanians, by washing its hands of the case against Shubeilat.

The most elegant solution would be to declare a mistrial, or to find Shubeilat innocent and release him, attributing responsibility for the matter to the previous government.



Laith Shubeilat