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Boycott is over? Participative trends in Gulf's Muslim Brotherhood

In the Arab Gulf region, contemporary although different trends in government-opposition dialectic have been surfacing. Broadly looking at state-society relations, Kuwait, Jordan and Bahrain are representative case-studies to identify and compare paths of political moderation or exclusion in an age of regional instability. All these countries will held parliamentary elections by two years.

In Kuwait, candidates belonging to the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM, also known as al-Harakat al-Dusturia al-Islamiya, HADAS) will run for the 2017 parliamentary elections. The Muslim Brotherhood-linked movement (even though no more formally affiliated with the international Brotherhood organization) boycotted last elections in 2012 and 2013 to criticize the electoral law, as many Salafi groups did as well.

In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood has been experiencing a “crisis of political identity” still unsolved and it often opted in the past for the electoral boycott, as occurred in 2010 and 2013. Notwithstanding rising intra-Ikhwan fragmentation, all the parties who claim for the Muslim Brotherhood’s legacy (the Islamic Action Front proceeding from the original movement funded in 1942, the Society registered in 2015 and the reformist initiative Zamzam) will take part to the legislative elections scheduled the 20th of September, although limited change is expected from the consultation.

In Bahrain, the main Shia political society, al-Wefaq, was dissolved on July 2016 by an administrative judicial act, under the accusation of “violating the law” (with regard to the new amendments to the Political Societies Law, banning the mix of politics and religion) and “favouring terrorism”. Few months ago, al-Wefaq’s activities were suspended, the funds freezed and its leader, shaykh Ali Salman, was condemned to nine years of jail, charged with plot and sedition. Moreover, Bahrain revoked the citizenship to ayatollah Issa Qassem, al-Wefaq’s spiritual guide.

The Shia factor and the Saudi influence are decisive to frame government-opposition relations in Bahrain, pending the 2018 parliamentary elections: differently from the United Arab Emirates’ crackdown on the Ikhwan, the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood’s political wing (al-Minbar) and the Salafi society al-Asala are instead precious allies of the al-Khalifa ruling dynasty in order to balance Shia’s strength among middle-class professionals. Interestingly, al-Wefaq’s political decline has started with the boycott choice.

After the 2011 uprising, al-Wefaq decided to withdraw from the Parliament and then to boycott both the 2012 and the 2014 elections: that political pronouncement put the Shia movement in a political cul-de-sac. From that moment on, the government rejected al-Wefaq as an interlocutor: refusing the existent rules of the game, the boycott had placed the group out of the system. At the same time, the youth street-mobilisation movement snubbed hypothetical coalitions with Ali Salman's political society, seen as too much compromised, for past dialogue attempts, with the ruling patronage system. In such a marginalized condition, more and more Shiites could embrace violent radicalization.

As underlined by some ICM's members, the opposition's absence from the parliament contributed to enhance mismanagements and corruption, fostering among citizens a sense of alienation with respect to the elected institutions. In the long period, the boycott strategy reinforces extra-parliamentary informal networks of power, so nullifying the already circumscribed role of political oppositions.

In the post-Mohammed Morsi era, the Gulf's Muslim Brotherhood has chosen a local-based and "reform from within" path: this confirms a Gulf-rooted tradition of pragmatic Islamism, open to "à-la-carte" coalitions with liberals and leftists.

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