

Christians, Muslims stump together in Jordan

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Akef Smeirat did something no other Christian candidate in Jordan is known to have done: he ran for office with an Islamist party.

“Today we need to stop talking about divisions: Islamist and leftist, tribe versus tribe,” Smeirat told residents of Fuheis, a Christian village, who gathered recently in a tent overlooking rolling olive orchards on the outskirts of Amman. “We need the efforts of all Jordanians, Muslims and Christians, hand-in-hand, to build a better Jordan.”

Ismael Abu Rumman, a Muslim candidate from a nearby town, campaigning alongside Smeirat, chimed in.

“We are one team, one message, and one voice—we want to reform Jordan,” Abu Rumman said. The two men were among 130 candidates that the Islamic Action Front fielded in the parliamentary election on September 20; four, including Smeirat, were Christian. Although the vote was close, none of the Christian candidates won.

But their unusual campaign, which was a first for 21st-century Middle East politics, not only brought Islamist candidates to Christian communities; it also brought Christian candidates to the refugee camps and working-class neighborhoods that are the heartland of Islamist supporters.

Such crossover is noteworthy not only in the Middle East, where Christians have been under attack from Iraq to Syria to Egypt, but also given the increasingly polarized political environments of the United States and some European countries.

Indeed, the IAF, the political branch of Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood, did not sign up token candidates; its Christian candidates are pillars of their communities, and it involved them in decisions ranging from electoral strategy to campaign slogans.

But some pundits remain skeptical about whether the move marks a new era in postsectarian politics or is simply a shrewd electoral strategy by Islamists to build a majority coalition. Jordan reserves nine of its 130 parliamentary seats for Christians,

who make up 3 to 4 percent of Jordan's population. And Jordan's new electoral law, which required candidates to run on a list of several candidates rather than as individuals, encouraged cross-tribal, cross-party, and cross-religious alliances.

Yet while the Brotherhood's slogans and campaign agenda changed, the movement's core tenets and founding principles, which call for an Islamization of society, did not.

"If you look deeply within the movement, you see these changes are only on the surface," said Musa Shteivi, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. "The Brotherhood manifesto does not call for a civil state or protection of minorities, which truly matter to Christians, making these changes merely cosmetic."

But the IAF said its outreach to Christians, which began in January, was part of a deep overhaul of the movement, rather than an alliance of convenience.

"In Jordan and across the Arab world, the political situation has changed, the demands of the people have changed, and we have changed," said Zaki Bani Irsheid, deputy leader of the Brotherhood and election strategist.

In a bid to reach beyond the Islamists' conservative base and become a national movement, Bani Irsheid formed the National Alliance for Reform (Islah), a network of like-minded reformist leftists, nationalists, tribalists, Islamists, and Christians. Islah, which includes the IAF, won 15 seats in the election, Al Jazeera reported.

The coalition aims to be a force in Jordan's parliament to push for political and economic reform and an end to what many perceive as rampant corruption. Bani Irsheid and others see Islah, rather than the Brotherhood, as the future direction of the Islamist movement.

Bani Irsheid and the IAF look to Tunisia's Ennahda or Turkey's AKP as models of centrist Islamist movements. But neither of those have attempted a high-profile coalition with religious minorities.

Although independent Christians chose to join the IAF's parliamentary bloc in 1989, this year's election marked the first time Islamists have openly drafted Christian candidates and campaigned alongside them.

“We are no longer a religious movement, but a wider, national movement to provide a voice for all Jordanians—particularly our Christian brothers and sisters,” Bani Irsheid said.

Christians in Jordan are better off than many of their coreligionists elsewhere in the Middle East. Many serve in the military, the royal court, and as cabinet ministers.

Candidates said they are in line with the tone set by Jordan’s King Abdullah and the Hashemite royal family, who have encouraged church construction along the banks of the Jordan River, welcomed church leaders from around the world, and sponsored the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week earlier this year.

“There are extremists in society on both ends of the spectrum that try to use religion to create tensions and undermine security,” said Audeh Quawas, a former Orthodox Church official who ran with Islah in the election. “We are the alternative voice to confront them.”

In the Islamists’ electoral agenda, Christians say they find many points of common concern to their constituency: lifting up Jordan’s struggling middle class, lowering university tuition fees, price control on basic commodities, and an end to corruption.

They also might actually be able to get things done.

For over 20 years, Jordan’s parliament has been dominated by members from different tribes more concerned with securing jobs and benefits for relatives than discussing issues of concern to everyday Jordanians. With the Islamists, the only organized and nationally relevant political party, candidates see a way to break the cycle.

“Some people ask me, How can a Christian defend Christian rights under an Islamist list?” Quawas said. “I have one simple answer: Have the last 20 years of tribal MPs done anything for us Christians? No, and it is time for a change.”

Christian and other minority candidates see their participation as a chance to further moderate the Brotherhood, which is attempting to evolve from a social conservative movement to a diverse, centrist political party.

“In the 1980s and ’90s the Islamic Action Front’s slogan was ‘Islam is the solution,’” Quawas said. “Now their campaign slogan is ‘Renaissance for the homeland, dignity for the citizens.’ We are changing them and their outlook—and that is only going to

be good for the country.”

The message of cross-religious politics has already had an impact. During the campaign, Islah banners strewn across Amman and Fuheis called for a “Jordan for all segments of society” and “No to sectarianism.”

“We don’t see it as a Christian going after Christian votes or a Muslim going after Muslim votes,” Abu Rumman said.

On the Day of Arafah, a holy day marking the hajj pilgrimage and the eve of the Eid holiday, Muslim candidates and voters lined up at Smeirat’s election tent in a show of support.

“Today we have fasted, we have prayed, and now we want to pray for your success,” said Salman Massaeed, Islah candidate and Smeirat supporter.

Observers are divided on whether Islamists’ change in tone and cross-sectarian appeal will continue beyond election day.

The Brotherhood’s past gives some Christians pause. Its only experience in governance—a brief stint in 1991 when the Islamist movement held five cabinet posts in a coalition government—was marred by controversy and sectarian overtones.

Popular backlash across the country, particularly among concerned minorities, erupted after the Brotherhood attempted to pass a series of conservative social measures, including banning alcohol, barring fathers from watching their daughters in sporting events, and segregating men and women at ministries, universities, and schools across the kingdom.

But many Christian voters say they were not scared off by the divisive politics of the past.

Jeryes Munir, a university student and voter from Fuheis, said, “We are raised as Jordanians who put our Jordanian identity first.”

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