

Sentencing of Shubeilat sharpens conflict with Jordan's establishment

by Our Special Correspondent

Translations of documents in Arabic for this article were done by Hussein Nadeem.

The case of Laith Shubeilat, the former parliamentarian who has challenged the policies of the Jordanian government, was closed, from a legal standpoint, on March 17, when a military tribunal sentenced him to three years in prison, on charges of *lèse-majesté*. But, politically, the conflict between the Islamist leader and the Jordanian establishment, has sharpened, and entered a new phase, as Shubeilat fights for the right to bring his cause before the public in parliamentary by-elections scheduled for the province of Al-Balqa on April 15. The authorities are challenging his right to run for office, knowing full well that the by-election for a seat vacated by the death of a parliamentarian, will be turned into a referendum on the economic and foreign policies of the government of Prime Minister Abdul Karim Kabariti.

The "legal" phase of the campaign against Shubeilat was a farce from the onset. Charged with having slandered the king and queen in a speech delivered in public back in November, Shubeilat was denied every basic right to his defense. First, the military court tried to disqualify his lawyer, Jawad Younis, and replace him with a court-appointed attorney. Then, when the defense presented its list of 59 witnesses, only one, who the prosecution hoped would prove hostile to the accused, was heard. As soon as it became clear that the witness was presenting material supportive of the defendant, the court dismissed him, and even threatened to arrest him. The other 58 witnesses were rejected out of hand.

When, on March 17, the court assembled to deliver its verdict, only 14 of the 150 lawyers on Shubeilat's defense committee were allowed to enter the courtroom. Shubeilat's wife, Rima, and eight of their ten children were present, along with a large number of security agents, international and national press, and a couple of observers. Among the latter were a woman from the U.S. Embassy Political Department, and a representative of the Schiller Institute.

The diplomat was there, she said, in her capacity as the person responsible for human rights cases at the embassy. She expressed "a special personal interest in this case." The Schiller Institute, which defended Shubeilat three years ago

when he was framed up on charges of plotting to overthrow the government, convicted, and then granted a royal pardon, has campaigned internationally for his release in the current case. The mobilization, which garnered support from parliamentarians around the world, climaxed in a demonstration in front of the State Department in Washington, D.C. on March 7, when King Hussein was there for talks. Demonstrators held a large banner which read, "Ban IMF; Free Shubeilat."

Support in Jordan

Outside the Amman court, which sentenced him to three years, large crowds gathered to protest the verdict and pledge support to Shubeilat's wife, who challenged the authority of the court. Jordanian authorities intervened repeatedly, to try to break up the demonstration. Cameramen from Dubai and Mexican television stations, as well as Reuters, said that their cameras had been destroyed or confiscated. Support came pouring in as well from almost all of the 11 professional associations, which represent Jordan's engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc. At a packed press conference in the professional union building that afternoon, the presidents and vice presidents of eight such unions issued statements protesting the verdict, and pledging continuing support for Shubeilat, who was recently reelected, while in prison, as president of the most prestigious union, the Jordanian Engineers' Association. Rima Shubeilat concluded the press conference with her own statement of her husband's innocence, which was greeted with cheers and applause.

Phase two of the confrontation opened when Shubeilat attempted to present his application for the by-elections in Al-Balqa. In a press release, Shubeilat's attorneys detailed how all attempts at enabling Shubeilat to register for the candidacy in Al-Balqa district were blocked by the Juweideh prison authorities, the Interior Ministry, and the Justice Ministry. Shubeilat and his wife applied to the prison director and to the interior minister in Amman for permission to have Shubeilat leave the prison temporarily, at his own expense and under whatever security conditions required, so that he could file for candidacy in Salt, the capital of the Al-Balqa electoral district. After travelling a circuitous route, the application was rejected.

Later, all attempts to allow Shubeilat to sign the papers required for filing his candidacy were aborted by the prison authorities. An application was made by Shubeilat's attorneys, Jawad Younis and Talal Abu Riyaleh, to the court in Amman, to allow them to assume power of attorney for Shubeilat. The court accepted the application and sent an official to obtain Shubeilat's signature. But the court official was prevented from meeting the prisoner, in violation to the court's order. Finally, on March 22, Attorney Ibrahim Al-Hadid took the papers to the prison and had them signed by Shubeilat, but, even then, the prison authority confiscated the papers by force. A second attempt was made to procure a court order, to allow for the formalities to be completed by the imprisoned candidate, but it, too, was sabotaged, this time by the Justice Ministry.

None of the letters drafted by Shubeilat, to the justice minister, the interior minister, the Attorney General, the Military Attorney General, and the General Director of Security, complaining of the illegalities, has received any answer.

On March 26, the governor of Al-Balqa made known, that he had rejected Shubeilat's application for candidacy, on grounds that the candidate had not presented the papers in person! Furthermore, he claimed that a convicted man could not qualify for candidacy. Shubeilat's attorneys responded with a legal writ, showing that all the grounds for this rejection were unconstitutional. The matter was to be decided by a district court by March 30.

Every attempt made by the candidate's legal team and campaign manager, to make public what had ensued, was also frustrated by dirty tricks on the part of the governor of Al-Balqa. A press conference scheduled for March 27 in Salt, was simply banned by the governor.

The reason for resorting to such chicanery is clearly political: The authorities do not want Shubeilat to take his message to the population, because they know that, were he to qualify for candidacy, he would win by a landslide. Such an electoral victory would be read as a mandate for the opposition, and against the government.

A campaign communiqué

Shubeilat was hauled into prison in the first place, because of his public criticism of the manner in which the government has been implementing "normalization" with Israel. In particular, the Islamist political figure has protested against the heavy-handed tactics used, to squelch opposition to the peace treaty with Israel. For his election campaign in Salt, Shubeilat has issued a statement saying he was challenging the population not to surrender to what he terms "State terrorism." He has charged, that many fellow citizens have cowed down in front of this threat and sold their souls, in order to stay out of prison.

Regarding the economic policy which the government has been pursuing in the name of the peace agreements, and which have, in fact, been imposed on the country by the

International Monetary Fund and World Bank, Shubeilat has been most outspoken. "These days, our economy is being sold in the auction bazaar of the IMF," he said. "Privatization and the free market economy are throwing our workers and engineers out onto the streets of unemployment and, consequently, to poverty, hunger, and crime," he said. Furthermore, he assailed the new legislation introduced, again in the name of peace, which has opened up Jordanian territory for sale to foreigners. Finally, he attacked the Jordanian government, implicitly, for turning the Jordanian Army and land into a base of operations against other Arab nations, specifically Iraq. This refers to the recent agreement sealed during the king's visit to Washington, whereby the United States will provide F-16 fighter jets to the Jordanians, and will engage in joint military maneuvers, which include flying over southern Iraq. Shubeilat concluded his campaign communiqué with a call to arms saying, "In such conditions, it has become a [divine] duty for each Muslim to counter all these conspiracies. . . . It has become a duty to urge mobilization against evil." This is the reason for his seeking political office: "For these things I have presented myself to you, honorable people of Al-Balqa," he wrote. "I challenge none of the other respected candidates. . . . I am challenging, in your name, the programs of injustice being forced upon the Jordanian people and Jordan."

Even before the higher court had a chance to deliberate on Shubeilat's candidacy, further drastic measures aimed at silencing the candidate were taken by the government. On March 28, a statement on the violation of human rights in Jordan was circulated to the international press. The document, which was signed by hundreds of Jordanians, reports on the "recommendation of the State Security Court to increase the sentence handed down to Shubeilat from three years to four and a half." It continues with a harsh attack on the new Kabariti government, which has promised to eliminate corruption and promote democracy: "The government that has declared a 'white revolution' is doing its best to prevent him from running in the elections of the Balqa governorate after it appeared that he is a point of convergence of opinion, on which the various political and social parties agree."

Further steps have been taken, as well, to limit Shubeilat's privileges as a prisoner: "The Director of General Security has rescinded his decision allowing his family to meet him face to face, despite the fact that the visits take place under the close monitoring of the preventive security officers, and only after a rigid search procedure. Shubeilat is not allowed to read the weekly papers, he is not allowed to read his mail, and is still held in solitary confinement in a cold, damp cell." In conclusion, the statement says, "The ongoing practices against Shubeilat and other prisoners of opinion are a farce that contravene human rights and the Geneva Convention. The prime minister and the cabinet are responsible."