

# Jordan's Unfinished Journey: Parliamentary Elections and the State of Reform

by **Curtis R. Ryan**

## SUMMARY

Despite efforts on the part of the Jordanian government to favorably portray its commitment to reform, a perception gap regarding the process and pace of transition to a constitutional monarchy persists.

Recent parliamentary elections, heralded by the monarchy as a significant step in a broader reform initiative have been cast by the Kingdom's critics as an insignificant response to popular demand for greater participation in the democratic process.

That response has included certain efforts to combat electoral fraud - foremost among which was the creation of an Independent Electoral Commission - but the extremely unequal distribution of seats, combined with boycotts by major opposition parties, has meant that the new parliament largely resembles its predecessors, with similar loyalties and little authority.

In every aspect of its engagement with Jordan, the U.S. government should increase its focus on domestic political reform, articulating in clear and consistent terms the importance of empowering parliament, rectifying imbalances in the electoral system, fostering free speech and ensuring that political representation more accurately reflects Jordan's electorate.

On January 23, 2013, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan held its latest round of parliamentary elections. Expectations among many in the opposition were low, and indeed the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated party, the Islamic Action Front, boycotted the elections entirely. These elections, they argued, would be no better than the last few, which had been marred by widespread allegations of fraud. Besides the Islamist movement, Jordan has seen a rise in opposition in locally-based HIRAK or popular movements, often rooted in East Jordanian communities previously regarded as core elements of regime support. Like the Islamists, and some leftist parties, most of these newer HIRAK opposition movements also boycotted the elections.

Yet despite the boycotts, the doubts, and the general lack of enthusiasm, the stakes for the 2013 polls were actually high. These were the first elections in Jordan since the start of the uprisings across the region that have come to be known as the Arab Spring. While Jordan had not experienced revolutionary tensions, it had seen demonstrations and protests — against corruption and for greater democratic reform — almost every Friday for more than two years. And since recent elections, especially those in 2007 and 2010, were tarnished by widespread abuses and charges of blatant rigging, the pressure was on the regime to produce a dramatically different electoral process. Cosmetic change, in short, would not be enough.

## UNEVEN ELECTORAL REFORMS

Elections are not a new phenomenon in Jordan. The kingdom held multi-party elections as early as the 1950's, and after a gap of several decades, returned to elections and a revived parliament as part of a political liberalization process that began under King Hussein in 1989. From 1993 onward, however, changes in the various electoral laws have drawn the ire of many in the opposition, and have at times triggered electoral boycotts altogether. Since 1993, Jordan has utilized the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system, better known in the kingdom as the one-person one-vote or "*sawt wahid*" system. Voters vote for one representative in their multi-member districts. The districts themselves are heavily gerrymandered, however, so that they are unequal, and favor

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nominally pro-regime rural areas over more heavily populated urban districts. This has led to over-representation for East Jordanians and under-representation for Palestinian Jordanians. In practice this has also meant greater representation for tribal Jordanians while undercutting the main bases of Islamist support.

But of all Jordanian elections since 1989, the 2007 and 2010 polls were perhaps the worst. In addition to countless complaints about the electoral laws governing these polls, each was riddled with accusations of rigging. Each produced a narrow and hence unrepresentative parliament with almost no credibility with the general public, and each represented an institution that was itself weak and ineffective. For many in the opposition, therefore, expectations were low indeed for the 2013 polls. The earlier reform process, in 1989, emerged as a defensive response to protests and riots that erupted across the country against the IMF-imposed economic austerity measures, government corruption, and lack of accountability in governance. Many of these same issues have plagued the country ever since, culminating most recently in November 2012 riots that looked very familiar to anyone who remembered the events of April 1989. Yet these recent riots, while intense, were by no means the beginning of a Jordanian revolution. In general, Jordanians seem to prefer reform to revolution, and tumultuous, unstable, and even violent examples of change in the region seem to have reinforced this focus on Jordan reforming its way out of its domestic troubles and regional pressures.

For King Abdullah II, the 2013 elections were needed as the final step in an initial series of reforms that together represented Jordan’s response to the Arab Spring. During that two-year period, the regime and its royally-appointed governments had introduced a series of reform measures, including amending the constitution, creating a constitutional court, loosening restrictions on public assembly (and hence on political protest), creating an independent electoral commission, and promulgating new laws on political parties and, of course, elections.

### **THE MIXED RESULTS OF THE 2013 ELECTIONS**

Jordan held its elections for the 17<sup>th</sup> parliament on January 23, 2013. The 2013 polls were conducted under yet another electoral law. This one maintained the familiar one-person one-vote system (SNTV) for 108 district seats out of a total of 150. The law also increased the quota to guarantee women’s representation to 15 seats (from the previous 12), while also maintaining seats to guarantee minority representation (9 for Christians, 3 for Circassians and Chechens). What was really new, however, was the addition of 27 seats to be determined by proportional representation voting for national lists that included, but were not limited to, political parties. For the 2013 elections, then, Jordanians were handed not one ballot, but two.

The new Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was tasked with explaining the process to voters and, very importantly, with cleaning up the voting system itself. The king appointed Abdalillah al-Khateeb, formerly foreign minister of Jordan, to lead the IEC. Khateeb had a well-deserved reputation for honesty and integrity, and in a matter of months, he and the IEC had conducted a re-registration process that registered more than 2 million voters. The IEC actually

took strenuous measures to demonstrate that this process was in fact different from those that had gone before. Ballots were pre-printed (these included pictures of the candidates and symbols for the national lists), voters were assigned to specific polling stations, and two photo IDs (including a new and valid voter card) were required in order to vote. All of this was designed to eliminate voter fraud. The IEC also invited hundreds of international election observers and thousands of domestic observers (from several civil society organizations) to watch every step of the process, including the counting of ballots after polls were closed at 8 pm on election day.

The IEC posted national turnout at 56.5 % of registered voters, which was hailed as a great victory by many government officials. This was a much higher number than either government or opposition had expected, even if one adjusts the numbers to a percentage of eligible, rather than registered, voters (in which case the figure would drop to around 40%).

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood-led boycott, other more moderate Islamists ran, both at the district level and via a national list as the Islamic Center Party. The Islamic Centrists won three seats through the national list, the largest number of any list in the country, as well as 13 at the district level. But 61 lists had competed for 27 seats, so most lists gained either one seat or none at all. In addition to the 15 seats for the women's quota, three women won seats outside the quota – one via a national list and two by winning their districts outright.

Approximately three quarters of the MP's are newcomers to parliament. So in that sense it looks new. But as expected, given the electoral system, most MPs are well-to-do men without party affiliations, but with centrist to conservative political views, and strong tribal links. After the elections, MP's voted to elect Saad Hayel Srour, a conservative veteran MP, to be Speaker of the Parliament, while the king appointed conservative former PM Fayez Tarawneh to be Chief of the Royal Hashemite Court. Tarawneh was then tasked with meeting all MPs in consultations to determine the new prime minister and government. The resulting discussions led back to the incumbent premier, and Abdullah an-Nsour was appointed to a second term as prime minister. This time, however, the king tasked Nsour not with a caretaker role, but with carrying forward a reform government for the four years to follow.

Even after the polls, many in both the regime and the opposition remain convinced that their respective stances (to hold the elections under a problematic law or to boycott the polls) will be vindicated. Regime critics argue that there has been much movement and noise, but little actual change. Specifically, they argue that parliament will remain weak and essentially powerless, that the electoral law will remain uneven and unrepresentative, and that the monarchy will not devolve any powers to the legislature. The king, in contrast, inaugurated the opening of the 17<sup>th</sup> parliament by stating that it represented "a milestone on the road to democratization and comprehensive reform." King Abdullah stressed that he expected a four-year government to emerge, this time with a prime minister determined following consultations with newly formed blocs in parliament.

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Both the regime and the opposition have been speaking in terms of constitutional monarchy. For the regime, this means a gradual phased transition to increasingly parliamentary governments. This is seen as a long-term process, dependent in part on the development of truly national political parties. Many in the opposition, however, also speak of constitutional monarchy, but they are referring to a speedier process, in which parliament is empowered and some powers devolve from the monarchy to the legislature and to parliamentary governments that are not royal appointees or enactors of royal policies, but are themselves empowered in a more authentic parliamentary system. This is an especially important divergence of views, because it implies that regardless of the cleanness and relative success of the 2013 elections, perceptions regarding the reality or cosmetic nature of reform will depend on what follows the elections: specifically, will there be corresponding and genuine changes to the system of governance itself?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is suffering through a significant economic crisis, and is plagued with endemic problems of corruption especially associated with privatization of the economy. At the same time, its own security and livelihood are challenged by regional turmoil even as the kingdom hosts more than 400,000 Syrian refugees. These are not small challenges and cannot be minimized or dismissed in any way. Yet neither can they be used as excuses to avoid more meaningful political reform. Indeed, they make home-grown domestic political reform that much more urgent a priority.

Fundamentally, the U.S. government must raise the profile of domestic political reform in its relations with Jordan. The United States should clearly identify concrete priorities for reform, communicate those priorities consistently to the Jordanian government and incentivize progress on questions of domestic reform. A shortlist of the most immediate political reform priorities the U.S. should articulate includes the following:

- **Support making the IEC permanent and more independent.** The IEC has made significant strides in improving the Jordanian electoral process. These can be built upon and improved in future municipal and national elections. But a starting point would be to make the IEC itself a permanent institution, with its own budget and its own staff (at present, personnel were seconded from other ministries for the elections). This would allow it to continue its work and be a truly independent body.
- **Support greater democratization and change within the electoral system.** While the IEC helped improve the electoral process, the electoral system itself remains highly problematic and does not fully represent Jordanians. The electoral law can be changed in many ways, including addressing the gerrymandering of districts Jordanians have grown accustomed to seeing over the years. Given the fissures of identity politics within the kingdom, this might be a particularly difficult place to start. But more easily achievable reforms might include increasing the percentage of seats allotted to national lists (possibly to as high as 50% of the parliament, as many in the opposition have frequently demanded). Any move away from the much-maligned SNTV system would be welcome, and U.S. policy makers might start by referring to a recommendation that Jordan’s own National Dialogue Committee had already proposed: 3 votes per voter – one for national lists and

two for district representatives. This might cut back on the localism, tribalism, and parochialism that prevents formation of national parties and agendas and, for that matter, prevents the formation of a truly national legislature.

- ***Support a stronger role for parliament.*** While the electoral system and the voting process are both important, ultimately they can be rendered irrelevant if parliament itself remains a weak institution. King Abdullah has spoken and written frequently about shifting toward parliamentary governments. An empowered parliament would represent a shift in Jordanian governance, including devolving some power from the monarchy to the legislature and government, creating a more parliamentary system side by side with the monarchy. This would suggest a greater separation of powers and an increase in checks and balances in Jordanian governance. It would represent, in short, a shift toward a more constitutional monarchy, an objective to which both the regime and opposition have continually referred .
- ***Support press freedom — including online media and an open internet.*** Jordan has been the leader in the Arab world in terms of development of the internet and information technology (IT). In 2012, however, vague press and publication restrictions were extended for the first time to online media . The main motivation was to rein in the countless electronic news sites that many regime conservatives deemed reckless in their reporting (but which are now Jordan’s most popular news sources). The danger, however, is that a perceived shadow of censorship now hangs over print and electronic media, including Jordan’s burgeoning online world of Facebook discussion groups, blogs, and Twitter. This, in turn, casts a pall over Jordan’s large and rapidly-growing IT sector. King Abdullah has actively cultivated for Jordan a reputation for openness to all aspects of globalization. Yet recent internet restrictions undermine the king’s own oft-stated positions on economic liberalization and political reform. For political reform and civil society to develop further — and for Jordan to remain open and attractive to investment, trade, and international business — an open and unrestricted internet is essential.

In addition to these immediate reform priorities, the U.S. should consistently encourage broader inclusivity in the political process in all of its engagements with the Jordanian government, including in its conversations regarding foreign assistance. The contours of such an approach might take the following shape:

- ***Engage Jordanian society — from civil society to political opposition.*** Broadly, Jordanians tend to believe that U.S. aid supports the regime, the Jordanian armed forces, peace efforts relative to Israel, and Syrian refugees. Many doubt, however, whether the U.S. is really concerned with domestic reform and change in the kingdom. With that in mind, the U.S. government should make greater efforts to meaningfully engage civil society, youth activists, women’s organizations, labor movements, the Hirak, political parties, the Islamist movement, and, indeed, all elements of democratic political life in Jordan. These, in turn, should be seen not as elements to be defused, but as core parts of the Jordanian body politic, and hence as essential parts of deeper reform efforts in the kingdom.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- **Further support the rights and roles of women.** Women enjoy full legal rights in Jordan, including voting rights and the right to run for office. In practice, however, many patriarchal tendencies remain. There were only four women on the National Dialogue Committee, for example, and none at all on the new Constitutional Court. The women's quota guarantees women's representation in parliament and increased in 2013 from 12 to 15 seats, but parliament itself increased in size from 120 to 150 seats, so the overall share remained steady at 10%. And even though two women were able to win district seats outright, and a third via a national list, the U.S. should encourage an increase in the women's quota. There would probably be resistance to doubling it to 20% of the overall seats, but even that wouldn't come close to approximating the real majority that women are in Jordanian society. Women's participation should also be encouraged and embraced at every level, including in greater numbers in polling centers, in parliament, in the cabinet, and in every section of Jordanian politics and society.
- **Support and commend Jordan's guarantees of minority representation.** Christians and ethnic minorities increasingly feel under threat in many parts of the Middle East, especially as regimes fall in the regional Arab spring. But Jordan under the Hashemite regime has a long history of tolerance and inclusion. It is therefore fitting that the kingdom has tended to guarantee representation for Christians, as well as for Sunni Muslim ethnic minorities like the Circassians and Chechens. Reserving seats to guarantee Christian and Circassian/Chechen representation is a good idea (it might even make sense to restore one of the Circassian seats in Amman that seems to have been lost in the various electoral law changes in recent years), and one that can be maintained even as the electoral law changes again.
- **Support the roles of Jordanian youth in political life.** If much of the Jordanian reform effort depends on "empowering" and "engaging" various institutions, political forces, or social groups, one of the most important of these is Jordan's highly educated, but increasingly constrained, youth population. In addition to dialogue, another good place to start would be to lower the age for running for office from 30 to perhaps as low as 18. Young people represent more than half the Jordanian population, and parliament and other institutions could certainly use an infusion of youth.

## CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

King Abdullah has described the 2013 elections as a milestone and Jordanian reform as a journey. That is a useful metaphor, because the positive aspects of the elections and the reforms so far can and should be appreciated, but must also be seen in each case as just another step in a longer process. Jordan, in short, isn't there yet. For reform to be more meaningful, it is imperative that the reform process continue and go much deeper than it has thus far. That would be a journey worth taking not only for the regime and for politically-engaged elites, but also for all of Jordanian society.