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ELECTIONS IN JORDAN: VICTORY FOR REFORM OR MORE OF THE SAME?

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The litmus test of the Jordan Spring—as King Abdullah II billed the national parliamentary elections on January 23rd—has now passed.¹ The elections were meant to mark the beginning of a new political phase in the kingdom, augmenting an intermittent, two-decade, palace-led reform program expedited since 2011 to mollify unrelenting public expression of frustration and grievance. How should the litmus test be read? Is it an indication of Jordan's successful democratic transition or a disappointment for the country's political reform process?

First we might ask why Jordan's elections matter to the rest of the world. Jordan's current situation reinforces a strategic importance that outweighs its small size. As uncertainty continues to pervade the region in the midst of the Arab Spring, the government's Western orientation draws American attention and commitment, manifested in the nearly \$700 million per year it receives in U.S. economic and military aid.² Additionally, the country's normalized relationship with Israel since 1994 is crucial to the U.S. and any future peacemaking efforts. Indeed, the relationship between Jordan and a future Palestinian state was a resurgent and prominent point of debate during the campaign season. The effects of the civil war in Syria are felt intimately in Jordan as it hosts nearly 350,000 refugees amid a shortfall of funding and fears of further regionalization and instability from the conflict. Jordan provided logistical support in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and collaborates regularly with American intelligence and defense efforts. Consequently, what happens in Jordan—including its parliamentary elections—is strategically important outside of its own domestic politics.

¹ http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/ar_JO/news/view/id/10229/videoDisplay/1.html [Arabic]

² <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/163555.htm>; <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/163555.htm>

POWERS OF THE LOWER HOUSE

How significant are elections for Jordan's parliament? Since the late King Hussein reinstated full parliamentary elections in 1989, the Jordanian parliament has enjoyed only a limited role in the country's political system. Its ability to oversee the executive branch is weak, and in practice its legislating powers are trumped by those of the government. In fact, the king reserves the constitutional right to dissolve the parliament at will. The appointed upper house of the legislature acts as a conservative institutional check on the elected lower house of parliament. Much like legislatures elsewhere in the Middle East, the Jordanian parliament has earned the reputation of a "rubber stamp," more a vehicle for patronage distribution to key constituencies than an actual decision-making body.

Such a perspective overlooks the fact that the parliament does possess a number of important powers that must be taken seriously by the monarchy. For example, the lower house must approve any prime minister appointed by the king, and in the early 1990s it used this power to pressure PM Mudar Badran into making concessions that advanced Jordan's political liberalization process. Moreover, the parliament's power to ratify international treaties compelled the government to manipulate the 1993 electoral law to sidestep resistance on Jordan's peace treaty with Israel. Far from being a docile body, therefore, a parliament that represents a range of political trends and opposition voices could potentially act as a limited though real check on the executive. At present, ongoing crises have raised important political and economic issues that may give the new parliament an opportunity to exert some influence.

ELECTIONS AS "SHINING MILESTONE"

The elections were marketed heavily to domestic and international audiences as a key victory for democratic development. In a letter to the Jordanian public, King Abdullah hailed the elections as "a qualitative leap and shining milestone" in Jordan's political development and a "stepping stone into a new era... of the process of change and envisioned reform [toward] political pluralism and public participation."³ An advertising campaign throughout the country urged people to vote under the slogan "Because it is your decision," suggesting that the kingdom had entered a period in which Jordanians control their political destiny. Interviews with Charlie Rose, Jon Stewart, and Sarah Daniel of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, transcripts of which were read and discussed on Jordanian radio, continued the refrain that Abdullah is a constitutional monarch ceding powers to a parliament over "several parliamentary cycles."⁴ The beginning of this process is to be the selection of a prime minister, previously a royal appointment, that is now promised to happen "in consultation with the majority coalition" in the new parliament.

Optimistic observers focus on electoral procedure as evidence of the election's positive contribution to the reform process. Indeed, interpretations of official turnout results suggested that Jordanians voted in greater numbers than the last elections in 2010 with approximately 57 percent of registered voters casting ballots.⁵ While acknowledging the need for a new election law with better representation, they draw attention to the creation of a new Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) responsible for election oversight, the addition of national lists in the election, prosecutions for vote-buying and corruption, and voter turnout. The mark of Western and international democracy promotion is clear in this regard after investing heavily in advising the IEC, monitoring polling sites, and facilitating public debates among members of national lists. With some blemishes, these efforts produced a transparent process. It was the first of Jordan's 17 national parliamentary elections to include international observers and oversight by an independent agency, both of which have confirmed a clean election.

ELECTIONS UNDER AN "UNFAIR SYSTEM"⁶

However, despite measures to ensure procedural efficacy, many Jordanians lamented the lack of substantive changes to the electoral system. As Jordanians took to the streets throughout the fall, the impending elections did not elicit the desired excitement for participation. Much of the electoral buzz was manufactured by the government, candidates, and democracy-promotion organizations in hopes of living up to the reformist rhetoric and

³ Al-Ra'i, "الملك: الانتخابات نقلة نوعية ومعلم مضئ في تاريخ الأردن" <http://alrai.com/article/565667.html>

⁴ Al-Ghad, "الملك: لن تكون الملكية التي سيرتها ولدي نفس الملكية التي ورتتها" <https://bitly.com/V1OPaG> [Arabic]

⁵ http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/25/optimism_after_jordans_election

⁶ Al-Ghad, "نظام انتخابي ظالم" <http://bit.ly/VxmxVK> [Arabic]

guaranteeing a credible process. But apathy over the elections is widespread in the kingdom where many people, particularly those without personal or familial connections to candidates, feel that “we’ll be their [the candidates’] friends until we drop our ballot, then they will not know us.”⁷

The source of popular dissent against the legislature has been the country’s electoral law, which opponents claim systematically biases legislative representation in favor of the monarchy’s East Bank, tribal support base. Under the new electoral system, each citizen has two votes: one for a local district candidate and one for a national list. However, from early on the new electoral law faced widespread criticism. Opponents argue that granting only a single vote at the district level provides voters with an incentive to cast their ballots based on kinship ties, a practice that generally favors conservative tribal candidates over those who are more likely to articulate a political, potentially reformist platform. Gerrymandering and uneven distribution of local district seats further skews parliamentary representation toward areas that have historically been most loyal to the regime, adding to the electoral system’s conservative bias.

The most significant change to the new electoral law has been the addition of a list system. This addition allows political parties and independent candidates from any political trend to form coalitions (i.e., lists) and win seats based on the proportion of the vote the list receives nationally. In theory, the national list system reserves parliamentary seats for “political” candidates, prompting the regime to tout this amendment as a positive step toward reform. King Abdullah has long emphasized a desire for three to five parties to develop that represent a left-to-right spectrum, and the lists were thought to be a step in that direction. However, given that only 27 out of 150 are reserved for national list candidates, opponents of the electoral law argue that the current system is no different from the “one man, one vote” system that has been generating docile parliaments since it was introduced in 1993.⁸

The regime worked hard to convince the opposition parties to participate in the elections as it would foster greater legitimacy of the process and increase voter turnout. However, the recent polls suffered an early blow to their legitimacy when the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic Action Front (IAF), which has historically played the role of the loyal opposition, announced that it would boycott any elections held under an “undemocratic, unconstitutional electoral system.”⁹ Prominent leftist parties followed suit. Without participation from Jordan’s largest and most popular political party, many have questioned the extent to which the latest round of elections could advance political reform.

The Brotherhood’s general objection to the law was reflected in society more generally, and events on the ground confirmed this popular disillusionment. In November, for example, many Jordanians burned their voter identification cards in response to the government’s removal of fuel subsidies, an act that symbolized the belief that no amount of political reform could solve the country’s economic troubles.¹⁰ Additionally, frequent reports of vote-buying leading up to the election cast continual doubt on the freedom and fairness of the entire process, doubts that remain their aftermath.¹¹ While the IEC prosecuted a number of candidates accused of buying votes, voters’ willingness to sell their support reflects the general belief they are unlikely to benefit from the electoral process in any other way.¹²

AFTER VOTING DAY

Riots and protests followed for days after the elections—events that were generally anticipated.¹³ The immediate effect of providing an institutional outlet for political voice was not one in which activists, particularly those whose preferred candidates lost, would become complacent. There would be no taking a “wait and see” approach to the performance of a new legislature and government.

⁷ Author interview, 15 January 2013. The sentiment reflects a common response to the question of whether one was planning on voting.

⁸ <http://jordantimes.com/political-parties-say-elections-bill-reinstates-one-person-one-vote-system>; <http://jordantimes.com/protesters-demand-elections-delay>.

⁹ Najem News, “اخوان الاردن يقررون مقاطعة انتخابات البرلمان” <http://bit.ly/Y15lzV> [Arabic]

¹⁰ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/24/251486.html>.

¹¹ Al-Ghad, “نزاهة الانتخابات وغياب العدالة” <http://bit.ly/14z8laK> [Arabic]

¹² <http://jordantimes.com/low-expectations-from-coming-house-encourage-vote-buying>.

¹³ Al-Ahram, “اندلاع أعمال شغب في الأقاليم الأردنية احتجاجا على نتائج الانتخابات- من سليم المعاني” <http://www.ahram.org.eg/Arab-world/News/196819.aspx> [Arabic]; See also: Al-Hayat, “الأردن: شغب غداة إعلان نتائج الانتخابات” <http://alhayat.com/Details/475865>

The IAF, other opposition parties, and many independent activist groups in the localities remain unsatisfied. By boycotting the elections, they opted to continue pressing their demands on the streets instead of under the parliamentary dome, and have committed to doing so as long as the fundamental structure of the electoral system remains. Mobilizing public demonstrations remains a primary option and an important part of sustaining support and can be expected to remain part of Jordanian political life going forward.

The IAF is simultaneously considering challenging the elections through the courts. It has in recent days reached out to other opposition groups about bringing a case to the Constitutional Court, arguing that the “unconstitutional” elections occurred without “national consensus” and did not meet its goal of expanding participation.¹⁴ The IAF has drawn attention to voter turnout to bolster its argument, stating that the government and IEC used figures (56 percent) based on a denominator of registered voters instead of the number of eligible voters. Following the latter method, turnout was a much lower 35%, and the IAF is saying that “two-thirds of Jordanians boycotted the elections.”¹⁵ There is no doubt that these battles will continue in the court of public opinion as well.

Moreover, it appears that little has changed substantively. The results suggest that the seventeenth parliament will not be the beacon of political reform that King Abdullah has touted. The national list system made little progress toward the organization of ideologically coherent parties that represent left, right, and center. In fact, the 27 seats reserved for national lists are divided between 23 different electoral coalitions, with the Islamic Centrist Party winning the most seats (3) out of any list. As has been the case with other parliaments in recent years, the latest round of elections has produced a lower house dominated by tribal and independent deputies that are deferential to the regime.¹⁶ These are the same kind of representatives that, historically, have lacked both political vision for, and commitment to, reforming the system.¹⁷ While all Jordanians agree that their country faces serious political and economic difficulties, far fewer are confident that the newest parliament will be up to the task of solving these problems. Instead of constituting a meaningful step of democratization, therefore, the new parliament quite literally represents more of the same.

CONCLUSION

The United States is committed to a strategy that ensures Jordan’s long-term stability through economic aid and political liberalization to placate public demands. Such a political strategy contrasts sharply with the more overtly repressive responses in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, and the use of financial accommodations through wage increases in the petro-states. The regime is too pragmatic to follow the former approach and does not have the money to follow the latter. As a necessary condition for democracy, but far from a sufficient one, the elections are a progressive step for Jordan’s democratic patrons in the West.

Like elsewhere, the U.S. confronts a collision of its interests and its ideals. We know that transparent elections and other procedural components of democracy do not equal democracy as such, and full-fledged electoral competition in which key centers of power are exposed to the electoral process may produce adverse results. As the most organized political party in the country, the IAF would likely do well under a more democratic system as the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt. Such a scenario would have the potential to alter Jordan’s positions on the regional issues that the U.S. cares about most – without producing liberal democracy in the country. The veneer of democratic progress is therefore preferable to a process that would threaten close and reliable U.S.–Jordanian relations. In this way, casting ballots is a performance of democracy within the current system, representing both a satisfying means and end.

But the Jordanian regime and the U.S. government understand that elections cannot be the only democratic objective in Jordan. King Abdullah has said, “My son will not inherit the same monarchy that I inherited,” and that is true for the regime to persist given its significant challenges. It is clear that these elections are important not

¹⁴ Islamic Action Front, “الاعلى للاصلاح” يشكك في الانتخابات ويدعو الى خطوات جادة للخروج من الازمة, <http://bit.ly/11kduJz> [Arabic]; Also see: <http://jordantimes.com/islamists-to-challenge-elections-law>

¹⁵ Islamic Action Front, “العمل الإسلامي”: ثلثنا الاردنيين قاطعوا الانتخابات”, <http://bit.ly/12c0UfA> [Arabic]; See also: Al-Ghad, “الحركة الإسلامية” <http://bit.ly/14tBWH4> [Arabic]

¹⁶ <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=80886&frid=23&seccatid=25&cid=23&fromval=1>.

See also: Al-Ghad, “مجلس الأهل والعشيرة” <http://bit.ly/14ti5aX> [Arabic]

¹⁷ Al-Ghad, “المجلس النيابي الجديد.. التطلعات والوقائع” <http://bit.ly/WhqA7b> [Arabic]

because things will change in Jordan's institutional politics, but because they may not. The reality is that the parliament remains very weak, is incapable of checking the executive, and therefore does not offer an outlet for the most frustrated segments of society to express their grievances. Adjustments at the edges, an electoral outlet, and efforts to coopt opposition may not be enough to appease the multi-dimensional opposition to the status quo.

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