



UNDERSTANDING ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

This Country Profile, Timeline, and Case Study on Jordan – created by [Tamar Friedman](#), a Junior Fox Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East – are part of a larger interactive [infographic](#) about electoral systems in the Middle East. Other countries highlighted as part of this project include: Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey.

Country Profile: Jordan



Two Tiers: 45 Districts & 1 National District

- Jordan has two tiers in its electoral system
- The first tier divides the country into 45 electoral districts
- The second tier treats the entire country as one electoral district

Bicameral

- The Jordanian legislature has two chambers—a lower body and an upper body
- The lower body is called *Majlis Al-Nuwab* and consists of 150 elected members
- The upper body is called *Majlis Al-Ayan* and consists of up to 70 members who are appointed by the King

Mixed: Parallel

- Voters cast two ballots simultaneously:
- The first uses a plurality/majority system to select 108 candidates from their local districts (First Past the Post in single-member districts and Single Non-Transferable Vote in multi-member districts)

- The second uses closed-list proportional representation to select 27 candidates from a national list (either a political party or a list of individual candidates is selected)

Executive Branch

- Jordan is a constitutional monarchy¹ and the King holds executive power

Quotas

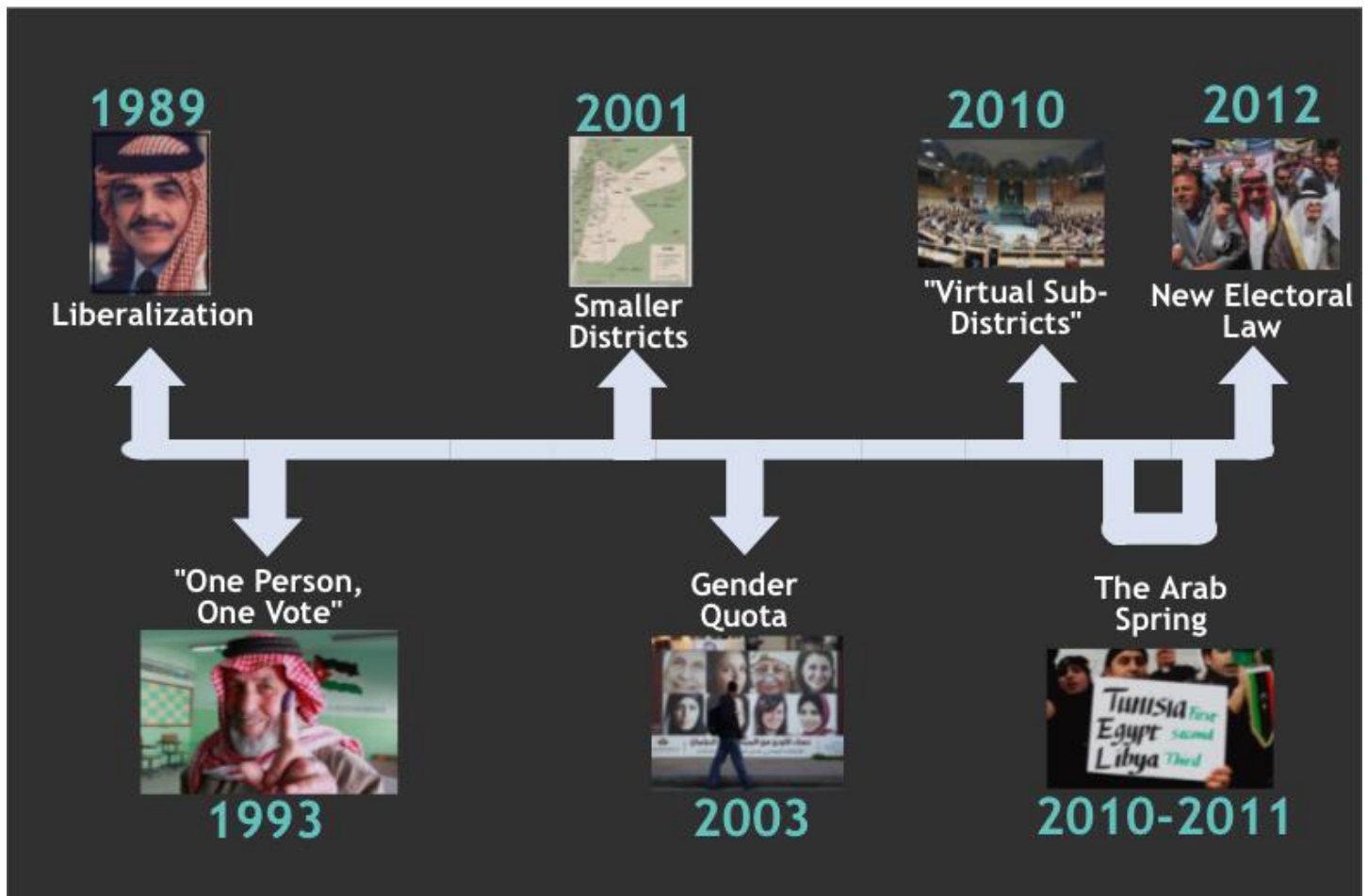
- 15 seats are reserved for female parliamentarians
- 3 seats are reserved for Chechens and Circassians
- 9 seats are reserved for Bedouins (from 3 non-geographical electoral districts)

Past Electoral Systems

- Jordan has cycled through multiple types of electoral systems throughout its history
 - 1989-1993: Block Vote (plurality/majority)
 - 1993-2013: Single non-transferable vote (other)
 - 2013-present: Parallel (mixed)

¹ Jordan is a self-proclaimed constitutional monarchy. Many scholars would actually call it a semi-authoritarian state.

Timeline



- **1989 Liberalization:** The monarchy began a process of political liberalization and reintroduced parliamentary elections in Jordan. The electoral system chosen was the plurality block vote, used to elect the 80 seats of the lower house in multi-member districts.
- **1993 "One Person, One Vote":** By royal decree, King Hussein passed a new electoral law that changed the electoral system from the block vote to the single non-transferable vote (SNTV). This system came to be called by Jordanians the "one person, one vote" system as it maintained the multi-member districts used for the block vote, but limited each voter to selected one candidate on the ballot.
- **2001 Smaller Districts:** The number of electoral districts was increased from 22 to 45, resulting in smaller sized districts. The number of seats in the lower house was raised from 80 to 110.
- **2003 Gender Quota:** In 2003 a gender quota was instituted in the lower house that reserved 6 out of 110 seats for female parliamentarians.

- **2010 “Virtual Sub-Districts”:** In the 2010 election, candidates in each district competed in virtual (not based on physical boundaries) sub-districts against only a small portion of the other candidates in that district. While, in theory, the candidates did not know against whom they were competing, there was a lot of speculation about corruption in which favored candidates were placed in virtual sub-districts with weak candidates against whom they were likely to win.² The seats in the lower house were increased from 110 to 120. The gender quota was increased from 6 to 12 seats.
- **2010-2011 The Arab Spring:** Protests beginning with the Tunisian Revolution spread across the Middle East and North Africa.
- **2012 New Electoral Law:** In response to the Arab Spring, King Abdullah II promises broad political reform and issues a draft law by royal decree to be debated and circulated by the government. The following provisions are instituted:
 - The seats in the lower house are increased from 120 to 150;
 - A parallel mixed electoral system is adopted with 27 out of the 150 seats elected through a closed-list proportional representation in one national district;
 - The Gender Quota is increased from 12 to 15 seats;

Jordan Case Study: “Individualistic” System, Incremental Reform

Electoral systems, by the very nature of their design, benefit certain people or groups over others. But on a more general and categorical level, electoral systems may benefit either “groups” (political parties) or “individuals” with important consequences for instituting electoral reform. Jordan is an excellent example to exhibit this phenomenon because its inherently “individualistic” electoral system has muted the impact of instituted electoral reforms.

Technically, Jordan has a parallel mixed electoral system. Out of the 150 parliamentarians in the lower house, or *Majlis Al-Nuwaab*, 108 candidates are elected through a majoritarian system in a total of 45 electoral districts (using a mixture of First Past the Post in single-member districts and Single Non-Transferable Vote in multi-member districts), and 27 candidates are elected through closed-list proportional representation in one national district. Additionally, 15 spots are reserved for women who did not win seats through the above framework and are filled by a method that will be discussed later.

The Jordanian parliament is bicameral and the upper house, or *Majlis Al-Aayan*, is comprised of up to 75 members appointed by the King. There are no seats reserved specifically for women in the *Majlis Al-Aayan*.

Additionally, Jordan is a constitutional monarchy, where executive power lies in the office of the King and where this executive power bleeds into the legislative sphere (as seen by the fact that the entire upper house is appointed by the King). The monarch also has the powers, and has used them on many occasions, to extend the term of either house in the parliament, to dismiss the parliament when he sees fit, and to dismiss the prime minister and/or the cabinet.³ Since King Abdullah took the throne in 1999, he dissolved the parliament in [2001](#), [2009](#), and [2012](#).

In 1989, the monarchy introduced political liberalization in Jordan in response to popular protest. Since then, Jordan has “tried on” a number of different electoral systems including the majoritarian block vote (1989-1993), the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) (1993-2012) and now a parallel mixed system combining elements of FPTP, SNTV, and proportional representation. The “individualistic” system that developed over time empowers tribal groups that have historically propped up the monarchy at the expense of other demographics in Jordan including secularists, Islamists, and Palestinian refugees.

Jordan’s electoral system is “individualistic” because the system (for the most part) mandates voters to vote for one individual and because the system encourages candidates to run as individuals, as opposed to running with a political party. Given the social fabric of the country, the “individualistic” Jordanian electoral system results in localism, tribalism, and clientelism, all of which lessened the impact of the reforms instituted in the 2012 electoral law and the subsequent 2013 parliamentary election.

² Michele Dunne, “Jordan’s Elections: An Observer’s View,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 17, 2010 <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/17/jordan-s-elections-observer-s-view>>.

³ “International Foundation for Electoral Systems FAQs on Jordanian Elections,” *Jadaliyya Reports*, January 23, 2013 <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9744/international-foundation-for-electoral-systems-faq>>.

Preparation for the 2013 Election: A Response to the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, beginning with Tunisia's Revolution in December of 2010, spread popular protests like wildfire throughout the Middle East for much of 2010 and 2011. In addition to Tunisia, uprisings took place in Egypt, Lybia, Yemen, and Bahrain; protests in Syria sparked the onset of the country's protracted civil war; and civil unrest rustled many other Arab countries, including Jordan.

In Jordan, anti-government protests were held nearly every week beginning in December of 2011.⁴ A patchwork of opposition groups that ranged from leftists to Jordan's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—the Islamic Action Front (IAF) took to the streets to express their discontent with the Jordanian government. Demonstrators called for [reforms extending well beyond the electoral system](#), including fundamental economic reforms and limiting executive influence on the legislative and judicial branches of government.

In response to regional instability and these domestic protests, King Abdullah II promised sweeping political reforms starting with the new 2012 election law. He claimed that the parliament elected under this law in the 2013 general election would have more credibility with the Jordanian people and thus be able to institute further political reforms.⁵ The King portrayed Jordan as a leader of reform in the region, boasting that Jordan had amended a third of its constitution.⁶ Naturally, King Abdullah feared alienating opposition groups to the point where they would revolt against the government, as had happened in other Arab Spring countries.

Immediate and significant political reforms in Jordan was the key to maintaining political stability in the wake of the Arab Spring. And the King used rhetoric to promote vast reforms in the years immediately following the uprisings. Yet the following aspects of Jordan's "individualistic" electoral system proved obstacles to obtaining as meaningful reform as was promised.

How "Mixed" is the Mixed System?

In 1993, King Hussein issued a royal decree that changed the Jordanian electoral system from a block vote plurality system to the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) or, as it was called by Jordanians, the "one man, one vote" system. This term is somewhat deceiving as "one man, one vote" is generally a way to describe the universal right of every eligible individual to cast his/her ballot in an election. Nonetheless, in this context it means a shift from each voter selecting multiple candidates (in the block vote system) to only having "one vote" for one individual candidate.

SNTV is a bizarre system that has many elements of plurality/majority systems, but is categorized by experts as an "other" type of electoral system. In SNTV, there are multi-member districts in which individual candidates compete for the available seats. Yet unlike the block vote, each voter may select only one candidate on the ballot. The candidates with the highest percentages of the vote fill the seats. A consequence of this is that seats can be filled by candidates who win a relatively low percentage of voter support. For example, if there are five seats available in a district and the five candidates with the highest percentage of votes received 35%, 25%, 18%, 5%, and 3% of the vote respectively (with all other candidates scoring lower than 3%), then an obscure candidate who was only selected by 3% voters in the district will have won the same prize (a seat in parliament) as the candidate who earned 35% of the vote. For this reason SNTV has been discarded by many of the countries that once used this system.⁷

In Jordan, King Hussein chose the SNTV system, not intentionally, but by virtue of adapting the part of the block vote system that was hurting support for the monarchy. Under the block vote, candidates had been using a couple of their votes to select family members or members of their tribe and selecting candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood with the rest of

⁴ Curtis R. Ryan, "The implications of Jordan's new electoral law," *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2012 <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/13/the-implications-of-jordans-new-electoral-law/>>.

⁵ "The Carter Center Releases Study Mission report on Jordan's 2013 Parliamentary Elections," *The Carter Center*, February 14, 2013 <http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/jordan-2013-study-mission-eng.pdf>.

⁶ Mohammed Jamjoom and Michael Martinez, "A lot at stake for Jordan in an election of firsts," *CNN*, January 23, 2013 <<http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/23/world/meast/jordan-elections/index.html>>.

⁷ Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have all discarded this system. SNTV is now fairly uncommon though it is still used in Afghanistan, the Pitcairn Islands, and Vanuatu as well as in parts of the electoral systems in Indonesia, Taiwan, and Jordan. "Countries using SNTV electoral system for national legislature," *International IDEA* <<http://www.idea.int/esd/type.cfm?electoralSystem=SNTV>>; "Electoral Systems," *ACE: The Electoral Knowledge Network* <<http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/es/esd/esd04/esd04a/default>>.

their votes.⁸ Hussein realized that, if limited to one vote, voters would stick to familial or tribal loyalties instead of voting for the Islamist group, and adjusted the electoral system accordingly.⁹ Thus, despite the fact that King Hussein legalized political parties in 1993, adopting SNTV at the same time reinforced local and tribal loyalties and increased the “individualism” in Jordanian elections.

The 2012 electoral law, while maintaining the “one man, one vote” system on the district level, implemented a mixed system with a second tier that uses proportional representation in one national district. However, only 27 out of 150 seats (18%) in the lower house are elected using proportional representation. Furthermore, since the 2012 law creates a *parallel* mixed system rather than using a mixed-member proportional mixed system (MMP), proportionality is only guaranteed within those 27 seats, not within the parliament at large.¹⁰ Opposition leaders denounced the 2012 mixed system saying that a mixed system should elect 50% of the seats using plurality/majority in small districts and 50% of the seats using proportional representation in a national district to truly bring about reform.¹¹

Additionally, the 27 seats filled using proportional representation were, at first, meant to be available only to formally organized political parties. Therefore a voter would select his/her party of choice and the party would fill the number of seats corresponding to the percentage of the national vote it won with members from its closed list. However, the 2012 electoral law allowed individuals to come together to form a national list and run for these seats even if they were not a political party.¹² Adding a tier of seats elected by proportional representation did not necessarily combat the individualistic nature of the Jordanian system because it did not incentivize party formation. All in all, the system continued to favor pro-monarchist tribal leaders and to disempower their opposition.

The result of these meager reforms was that the IAF boycotted the 2013 elections and that critics complained that policies meant to weaken Islamist groups also kept leftists and youth parties out of government, further alienating these populations. True, no violent uprising followed the 2013 election, but the great reforms promised to the Jordanian people were also not delivered.

Districting Reinforces Localism, Tribalism, and Clientelism

Districting trends in Jordan have also contributed to the “individualistic” system and the 2012 electoral law did little to fix this. In fact, the 2012 law only introduced two amendments to the previous electoral law: adopting a mixed system and increasing the gender quota from 12 to 15 seats. It did not make changes in the crucial area of districting.

In 2001, the number of districts was increased from 22 to 45, resulting in smaller local districts.¹³ In the 2013 election, 18 of these 45 districts were single-member districts (using FPTP) and 27 were multi-member districts (using SNTV).¹⁴ Small districts like these combined with voting for one candidate encourages clientelism, or the direct exchange of goods and services for constituent votes. A candidate running for the Jordanian parliament does not need to amass a national or even regional base of support in order to be elected. Rather, a candidate can “buy” votes from local community members by providing specific goods and services and, by doing so, rise to a position of national prominence. This system encourages corruption, intensifies local and tribal loyalties, and inhibits the development of broad ideological political parties.

Tribal leaders benefit further because of the huge disparities between population size and parliamentary seats in the various electoral districts. For example, in the Amman governorate, voters had 32% less voter impact than the average Jordanian whereas in the Ma’an governorate, voters had 125% more voter impact than the average voter.¹⁵ Another way to illustrate the inequality is to frame it in terms of how many votes were required in different districts to elect a candidate. While it took 11,624 votes to elect a candidate in Irbid’s Seventh District in 2013, it took only 1,648 votes to elect a candidate from Ma’an’s

⁸ Andrew Reynolds and Jorgen Elklit, “Jordan: Electoral System Design in the Arab World,” *International IDEA* <<http://www.idea.int/esd/upload/jordan.pdf>>.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ See a comparison of MMP and parallel mixed systems in the associated electoral system infographic.

¹¹ Mohammad Yaghi, “Jordan’s Election Law: Reform or Perish?” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 4, 2012 <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/jordans-election-law-reform-or-perish>>.

¹² “The Carter Center Releases Study Mission report on Jordan’s 2013 Parliamentary Elections,” 17.

¹³ *ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴ Three of these districts represent Bedouin communities not bound by geographical borders.

¹⁵ “Assessment of the Electoral Framework,” *Identity Center and Democracy Reporting International*, Final Report, March 2013, 26 <http://www.democracy-reporting.org/files/dri_jo_assessment_of_electoral_framework_v1_2013-04-04_1.pdf>.

Second District.¹⁶ This gives voters in Ma'an, a more tribal area, more voting power and a disproportionate advantage over voters from urban areas such as Amman and Irbid.

This essentially means that certain voters' ballots count more than others. The votes of those in tribal areas outweighs that of the urban population. This allows the king to maintain a constitutional monarchy while still controlling the country and its constituencies through the reinforced support of tribal leaders. Not addressing these district issues in the 2012 electoral law limited the law's ability to enact meaningful reform.

Gender Quotas

Another reform that's impact has been limited by Jordan's "individualistic" electoral system is the gender quota.

Gender quotas have gained popularity since the 1990's and have been adopted in many countries all around the world. The goal of gender quotas is to ensure that there is a minimum guaranteed representation of women in political bodies. These quotas come in different forms—there are *reserved seats* which set aside a certain number or percentage of seats in the legislature exclusively for female parliamentarians; *legal candidate quotas* which dictate a minimum percentage of candidates running for seats who must be women; and *voluntary political party quotas* which are not mandated by law but rather voluntarily adopted within a political party.¹⁷

The second two types are gender quotas that work with electoral systems where political parties are strong. It is not surprising then that Jordan's gender quota ensures 15 *reserved seats* for female parliamentarians. This number was raised from 12 to 15 reserved seats by the 2012 electoral law (one from each of the 12 Jordanian governorates) and the three additional seats set aside seats for a woman from each of the Bedouin districts. In a legislative body comprised of 150 seats, this brings the Jordanian gender quota to 10%, which is below the "critical mass" of 30%-40% recommended by many who promote gender quotas.

Gender quotas are a controversial measure among academics and policy-makers. Some say it is a necessary tool to overcome systematic discrimination against women in politics. For countries that have had little to no female participation in politics in the past, they argue, gender quotas can serve as a "fast track" method to ensure more equity more quickly than alternative methods. Critics argue that gender quotas can actually limit the political power of women and, instead of acting as a minimum threshold, may act as a de facto maximum for female participation in the legislature. Another argument against quotas is that they may increase the descriptive representation of women in government (meaning there will be a larger *quantity* of women involved than before), but it does not necessarily help women attain *qualitative* equity in government. The women elected through gender quotas may not have access to prominent positions and are sometimes manipulated by male family members or male political party leaders.

Jordan's gender quota has certainly helped bring women into the political sphere. In the 1997 election, the last election before the institution of the gender quota, no women were elected to the parliament. An increase from zero female parliamentarians in 1997 to 18 (12%) less than twenty years later in 2013 is a huge gain for Jordanian women that was only made possible by the gender quota. However, the nature of Jordan's gender quota, as a result of Jordan's overall "individualistic" system, can make it harder for women to integrate into the legislature without the infrastructure of established political parties. Furthermore, with the SNTV system, it is possible to tell not only *that* three women were elected without the quota, but also *which* three women were elected this way or, more importantly, which 15 women were elected despite the fact that they did not get more support than their male counterparts. While quotas within political parties incorporate women into existing political structures and make it difficult to discern which specific women came to power because of the quota, the gender quota in Jordan's "individualistic" system can undermine the credibility (or *substantive* representation) of women who gain seats through the gender quota once they are in office.

Additionally, gender quotas have become yet another tool for tribal leaders to gain power in the parliament. There is one seat reserved for a woman from each of the 12 governorates in Jordan, to be filled by the woman in the governorate who receives the highest *percentage* of the vote in her particular district, not the woman who receives the highest total number of votes. This

¹⁶ "The Carter Center Releases Study Mission Report on Jordan's 2013 Parliamentary Elections," 12.

¹⁷ Dahlerup, Drude, "Increasing Women's Political Representation: New Trends in Gender Quotas" in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, ed. Julie Ballington & Azza Karam (Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), 2005; "The Quota Project: Global Database of Quotas for Women," International IDEA <<http://www.quotaproject.org/>>; Krook, Mona Lena; Joni Lovendusky; Judith Squires, "Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand: gender quotas in the context of citizenship models" in *Women, Quotas and Politics* ed. Drude Dahlerup (New York, Routledge), 2006.

technicality is important because a woman in a district with a smaller population can win a higher *percentage* of the vote in her district even if the total number of votes she received are fewer than a female candidate in a larger district. Seeing the strategic opportunity, tribal leaders in small districts have taken to nominating a female candidate in the hopes of gaining a seat for the tribe they could not have won with a male candidate (remember: the woman does not need to win a higher percentage of the vote than males in the district; only a higher percentage of the vote than females in the other districts of the governorate).¹⁸ On the one hand, this may be a breakthrough for empowering female candidates from tribal areas that tend to be socially conservative. On the other hand, this tactic further strengthens tribes who favor perpetuating the individualistic nature of Jordan's electoral system.

Therefore, increasing female representation in the legislature has proven to be yet another that may unfold more slowly as a result of Jordan's "individualistic" system.

Conclusion

The Jordanian government, and many in the West, see Jordan as a model of stability and steady reform in the Middle East, despite the undemocratic nature of the monarchy. Compared to its Arab neighbors, Jordan has amended its constitution, passed electoral reforms, and retained relative stability in a period of great upheaval.

Yet, at a closer glance, the reforms King Abdullah proposed in the wake of the Arab Spring were supposed to greatly boost confidence in the legislature and appease opposition groups who might spark an uprising. While the 2012 electoral law does seem to have prevented the spread of the Arab Spring to Jordan, it also did not succeed in raising confidence in the Jordanian government and perhaps further damaged the perceptions certain groups have of Jordan's political efficacy.

A new electoral law, introduced by the government on August 31, 2015 in preparation for the 2017 general election, will once again put the government's promises for meaningful electoral reform to the test. Officials say the new law will return to using the 1989 block vote system at the district level while maintaining the second tier introduced in 2013 that elects candidates through national list proportional representation. The law will also decrease the size of the lower house from 150 to 130 seats. It will increase the number of candidates selected from some highly-populated urban areas and maintain a gender quota of 15 reserved seats (though out of 130 that is an 11.5% quota as opposed to the former 10% quota of 15/150 seats).¹⁹

Once again Jordan will be instituting electoral reform. But opposition groups have been quick to come out against the new law, saying it is still not sufficient reform. As seems to be the trend in Jordan, frequent reform does not alone seem to solve the problem.

¹⁸ "The Carter Center Releases Study Mission Report on Jordan's 2013 Parliamentary Elections," 25.

¹⁹ Curtis R. Ryan, "Déjà vu for Jordanian election reforms," *The Washington Post Monkey Cage Blog*, September 2, 2015 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/09/02/deja-vu-for-jordanian-election-reforms/>>.