

Ryan, Curtis R. (2003), Political opposition, democracy and Jordan's 2003 elections. Perihelion: Online Journal of the European Rim Policy and Investment Council. August 2003. Published by the European Rim Policy and Investment Council (ERPIC). The version of record is available open access from the publisher at: <http://www.erpil.eu/>

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After more than two years of delays, the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan in June 2003 held national parliamentary elections in an effort to re-engage its stalled political liberalization process. That process started with a great deal of fanfare in 1989, but began to reverse itself by the time the regime signed its 1994 peace treaty with Israel. After the treaty, the deliberalization trends continued and even showed few signs of abating after the succession in the monarchy from King Hussein to his eldest son King Abdullah II in 1999. Given this context, the 2003 elections were deemed especially important by both government and opposition. They were the first since 1997, the first since the dissolution of parliament in 2001, and the first under King Abdullah II. This article provides a brief outline of Jordan's political liberalization since 1989, with emphasis on the results and implications of the kingdom's June 2003 national parliamentary elections.

Jordan's Elections and Liberalization

The kingdom initiated the much-heralded program of political and economic liberalization in 1989, following riots and demonstrations in southern Jordan. The public protests were not only against the social pain associated with an International Monetary Fund austerity program, but also corruption and nepotism in government. Stunned by the public outcry, King Hussein initiated the liberalization program in an attempt to stabilize the country and restore public support for the regime. In the first several years of the program, liberalization included easing government controls over the media, restoring parliamentary life and electoral democracy for the lower house of the legislature, and lifting martial law for the first time in more than twenty years. By 1993 - following the 1991 creation of a new National Charter dedicated to pluralism, liberalization, and loyalty to the Hashimite monarchy – the regime allowed for the legalization of political parties for the first time since the 1950s. In sum, it is fair to say that Jordan's political liberalization process was the most extensive in the entire Arab world.

That began to change, however, as the kingdom secured its 1994 peace treaty with Israel. Thereafter, regime tolerance for dissent declined precipitously. The opposition had, in fact, surprised regime loyalists by taking more than half the seats in parliament after the first elections, in 1989. In response, the regime changed the electoral law for the 1993 elections, switching to a one-person one-vote system. The previous electoral law had allowed citizens a number of votes matching the number of representatives for their respective (multi-member) parliamentary district. Citizens in the city of Irbid, for example, had nine representatives in parliament, and hence nine votes. A new electoral law ended this practice and also featured a set of uneven electoral districts that favored rural pro-regime constituencies over more urban bases of support for opposition groups from the secular left to the religious right. The main concern for the Hashimite monarchy, however, was to curb the potential parliamentary power of groups such as the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political party wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and by far the largest and best-organized party in the kingdom.

The strategy worked and, not surprisingly, the IAF as well as secular leftist parties lost seats in the 1993 elections. Jordan's opposition parties then threatened an electoral boycott in 1997 unless the electoral law were reformed. When no such revision took place, the IAF led an 11

party bloc in boycotting the 1997 elections, yielding a 1997-2001 parliament dominated by pro-regime conservatives, tribal leaders, and very few opposition voices. That parliament, compliant though it was, was dissolved by the king in 2001, rendering the kingdom with no active parliament for more than two years. In that time, the palace ruled by decree, issuing a series of controversial emergency and temporary laws. Indeed, the monarchy issued more such laws in that two-year span than in the entire previous history of independent Jordan since 1946. The “temporary” laws restricted media, press, and publications, clamped down on political demonstrations, and created elastic measures to curb dissent.

In a particularly telling incident, Jordan’s first elected woman parliamentarian, Tujan al-Faysal, was arrested for e-mailing the king with charges against the prime minister. Faysal had suggested that the prime minister had personally benefited from legislation on insurance rates that his government had pushed through. The former parliamentary representative was arrested, tried, and convicted for defaming the prime minister, the government, and the kingdom. Since Faysal is one of the most outspoken voices for liberalization and extending women’s rights in Jordan, many in the pro-democracy movement regarded these events with suspicion to say the least. After serving one month of her sentence, Faysal was then pardoned by King Abdullah, but, having served time in prison, she was then thereby deprived of her right to run again for office as the 2003 electoral campaign got underway.

Return to Liberalization? The 2003 Elections

The new Jordanian elections represented yet another test case regarding the degree of democratization within Jordanian politics. The regime had postponed them for more than two years, initially over a new voter card system that would take some time to prepare. The more pressing reason, however, may have been the return of the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, against Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Yet, after the Intifada began, regional politics only destabilized further with U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In each case, new electoral delays were announced.

In June 2003 the elections were finally held under still another electoral law. The new law, announced in July 2001, lowered the age of voting eligibility for men and women from 19 to 18, and increased the number of parliamentary seats from 80 to 104, with new (but still uneven) electoral districts. In February 2003, King Abdullah added to the changes with a new decree adding six more parliamentary seats in a specific quota to ensure minimal representation for women. In the previous three elections (1989, 1993, and 1997) only one woman was elected to parliament: Tujan al-Faysal. Interestingly, the Islamic Action Front had originally opposed the women’s quota, but then included for the first time a woman, Hayat al-Musayni, among its slate of 30 candidates. No Jordanian woman won a seat outright in 2003, but Musayni turned out to be the top vote-getter among women candidates overall. Thus in an ironic twist, the first woman seated in the new 2003-2007 parliament was a conservative Islamist activist.

The Islamic Action Front succeeded in getting 17 of its party members elected (including Musayni). Aside from the IAF, five independent Islamists were also elected including such high profile Islamists as Abd al-Munim Abu Zant, whom the IAF had expelled from membership just before the election. Most of the parliamentary seats, however, went to traditional tribal leaders

or former government officials. At least 62 seats out of 110, in short, went to loyalist pro-regime figures. Voter turnout stood at 59 percent of eligible voters, with few mishaps or irregularities. There were exceptions, however, as the IAF charged that extensive vote-rigging had taken place in the southern city of Kerak. The government acknowledged this in part, but asserted that the matter had been caught in time and “taken care of”, and although the overall turnout was respectable, the numbers varied considerably across districts. Turnout in rural areas, for example, tends to be very high, while urban Palestinian-majority districts register the lowest turnouts in the kingdom, suggesting that these neighborhoods have limited confidence in the government, the electoral system, and their own political efficacy.

Liberalization and Jordan's 2003-2007 Parliament

As Jordan's new parliament convened for the first time, disputes arose on the first day over the oath of loyalty itself. While all 110 MPs swore an oath of loyalty and allegiance to King Abdullah, the IAF delegates added a provision ensuring loyalty for as long as the king ruled in accordance with Islam. The testy exchanges from the house floor may signal the type of parliament one may expect over the next four years. While it is dominated by tribal and pro-regime figures, it does at least include a vocal and not-at-all timid opposition. Indeed, the IAF made clear that its participation in the elections in no way represented its approval of the electoral laws, which it still regards as systematically biased against Islamist and Palestinian representation. Rather, the party decided to participate in the electoral process in large part in order to change it. Dr. Abd al-Latif Arabiyyat, an IAF leader who previously served as parliamentary speaker but chose not to run this time, stated flatly that “our decision is based on the strong belief that the time has come to rectify all the wrongdoings that have been committed by the government over the past years.” For the IAF, this includes not only the series of temporary laws, but also the 1994 peace treaty with Israel. On these points, many secular left representatives agree with the Islamists.

The elections certainly were a step in the right direction in terms of reviving the liberalization process, but for this process to continue as meaningful liberalization Jordan needs not only the restoration of parliamentary life, and indeed not only the return of the opposition to the political process; rather, what is also needed is a restoration of Jordan's civil society to the more open days of 1989-93. In this regard, the new parliament immediately began debate on all 230 temporary laws issued from 2001 to 2003. These include the controversial electoral law itself, as well as equally controversial measures regarding public assembly, the media, the penal code, and the municipalities. Almost all of these laws need to be reformed in some way for Jordan to return fully to its path of political liberalization. The new municipal elections law, for example, provides for election of half the membership of town councils, while the other half and even the president will be government appointees. This rather clear step backwards stands in contrast to the more positive message from the national elections themselves, and it too will be challenged by the opposition.

Overall, the 2003 elections were a positive step - but only one step. Real momentum in reviving full political liberalization will require changing the temporary laws and allowing for the re-emergence of a more vibrant civil society. Should that occur, then Jordan will once again be a model for the region.

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