## Parliamentary elections in Jordan, January 2013

Bank, André; Sunik, Anna

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Notes on recent elections

# Parliamentary elections in Jordan, January 2013

André Bank [1], Anna Sunik*

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Middle East Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, 20354 Hamburg, Germany

Jordan held its first elections since the beginning of the "Arab Spring" on January 23, 2013. Against the backdrop of region-wide mobilization in the Middle East, which led to the ousting of authoritarian President Mubarak in Egypt in 2011 and the civil war in Syria, the elections to the 17th lower house of parliament in Jordan were widely considered a political litmus test for King Abdullah II. Jordan experienced its own opposition mobilization throughout 2011 and 2012, with unprecedented criticism of the monarch. At the same time, the general political mood in Jordan has still overwhelmingly been one of gradual reform, not revolution. Therefore, the parliamentary elections of January 2013 must be seen in the context of an increasingly politicized and frustrated Jordanian public on the one hand, and a rather successful royal political survival strategy on the other.

## 1. Background

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is formally a constitutional, hereditary monarchy with a bicameral parliament. National politics is dominated by the king, who is granted wide-ranging de jure competencies. As the head of the executive, he is not subject to a system of legislative or judicial checks and balances. At the same time, the king is authorized to dismiss the existing government, including the prime minister, and to dissolve parliament. In the latter case, the king can govern with the help of decrees, which was common practice under King Hussein's reign from 1953 to 1999. This system has continued during the reign of his son and successor, King Abdullah II, who acceded to the throne in February 1999. While these formal competencies of the king in Jordan are already substantial, his de facto political influence goes even beyond this. He controls a wide network of patronage relations, which include core social groups such as Transjordanian notables (i.e. tribal leaders hailing from the rural areas east of the River Jordan) as well as Palestinian-Jordanian crony capitalists (Bank and Schlumberger, 2004).

Given this concentration of political power in the hands of the king, the Jordanian parliament is not capable of exerting substantial control and legislative functions vis-à-vis the executive. Rather than initiating laws themselves, parliamentarians in Jordan usually rubberstamp, sometimes add and only in exceptional cases reject the government's proposals. Despite these clearly limited capacities for democratic control, there is a high degree of competition for accession to parliament. Parliamentary elections in Jordan are more than pseudo-democratic reform theater for the Jordanian population and, in particular, Jordan's Western donors – on whom the country is financially dependent. In line with what Ellen Lust (2009) understands as "competitive clientelism," election campaigns in countries like Jordan are usually less about programmatic and ideological differences and more about the patronage opportunities and spoils related to parliamentary seats – especially for the broader family and tribal support base. Seen in this light, the Jordanian parliament has therefore been termed a "service parliament" (Clark, 2010, p. 126).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: þ 49 (0)40 428 25 722.
E-mail addresses: andre.bank@giga-hamburg.de (A. Bank), anna.sunik@giga-hamburg.de (A. Sunik).
[1] Tel.: þ 49 (0)40 42825 584.

## 2. Electoral system

Since the Constitution of 1952, Jordan has had a bicameral parliament. The lower house, the House of Representatives (Majlis an-Nuwwab), is one of the few bodies in the Jordanian political system which is elected directly. The upper house, the Senate (Majlis al-A'yan), is appointed by the king. Parliamentary process, however, was suspended during the period of martial law from 1967 to 1989. During that time, there were no general elections, and political parties were banned until 1992. Consequently, the first multi-party elections since 1956 took place in 1993. The 1989 elections, which were considered free and fair, resulted in a surprise landslide victory for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) – by far the largest and most important social movement in Jordan. To prevent this result from repeating itself, the king introduced a new electoral system which favored the traditional backbone of the Hashemite kingdom – conservative tribes from rural Transjordanian areas – to the detriment of the urban population and the Palestinians who constitute a majority in Jordan.[2] Since 1993, the Jordanian electoral system has been based on the "one man, one vote" (sawt wahid) principle – a single non-transferable vote, where candidates compete for a direct vote on the district level with only the majority candidate winning a parliamentary seat. This system, combined with extensive gerrymandering – which favors rural and tribal areas over urban and Palestinian ones, namely the northern cities of Amman and Zarqa – contributed to a heavy tilt towards regime loyalists, with large parts of the opposition as well as the Palestinian Jordanians widely excluded from the electoral process. There have been numerous amendments to and reforms of this very controversial law, the most recent in June 2012 (Kao, 2012). This last change included enlarging the lower house from 120 to 150 seats, adjusting the women's quota accordingly from 12 to 15 seats, creating an independent election committee (IEC) and providing an additional ballot for the national level. Currently, 27 of the 150 seats are reserved for "national lists" (i.e. parties and party-like blocks). The latter change adds a proportional element resulting in a mixed or parallel voting system in which the party list component is not compensatory to the plurality component.[3] Furthermore, as parties were only re-included into formal political contestation in 1992 and traditional personal and tribal ties are still strong, the Jordanian party system is underdeveloped. Apart from the Islamic Action Front (IAF) – the political wing of the MB – the registered parties have no roots in society and do not enjoy widespread support.[4] Although the demonstrations that began in early 2011 did generate some new political blocs and movements, these have not yet been consolidated into political parties. Moreover, while the king and government described the reformed electoral law as an attempt to strengthen the party system, the opposition asserted that it would have the opposite effect, by reinforcing tribal loyalties and doing nothing to weaken the loyalist bias in the plurality component. Due to what they saw as the deficient nature of the reform and its failure to ensure more adequate representation, the IAF along with some newly formed opposition groups announced their boycott of the elections early on.

King Abdullah also announced that the prime minister would henceforth be chosen in consultation with parliament – a novelty considering that he had always been appointed by the king. However, given the secured loyalist majority in parliament due to the biased electoral law, it was highly unlikely that a candidate not approved by the king and the security services would be elected prime minister.

## 3. Campaign, contenders and issues

Since most candidates were independents and even most of the party-like lists were ad hoc coalitions led primarily by charismatic or influential Transjordanian leaders, differences in party programs were hard to discern. While some more conventional political parties, ranging from socialists to Arab nationalists, also took part, they did not gain any significant share of parliamentary seats. Since the wave of protest in early 2011, new opposition groups have emerged such as the umbrella organization of youth movements, Jayeen (We are Coming), and the National Front for Reform – led by former prime minister, Ahmad Obeidat – which encompasses many nationalist and leftist parties; however, most of those groups boycotted the elections along with the IAF.

Election slogans revolved mainly around corruption – seen by the population as one of the most severe problems facing the country (IRI, 2012) – along with the dire state of the economy and institutional reform. Even more important, however, were the procedural issues – outside of the actual campaigning – such as the boycott by the primary opposition, the IAF, and the wider opposition's criticism of the pace and nature of the reforms process, especially concerning the electoral law.

The Jordanian elections serve as more than simply the selection of state officials; they also reinforce the legitimacy of King Abdullah's gradualist approach. Successful elections would legitimize the king's approach abroad as well as at home. To be successful, the elections needed to be perceived as free of major electoral fraud, to attract a high turnout, and to ensure more adequate representation – not just of loyalist Transjordanians but of all major political and social groups, especially women, Palestinians, minorities and parts of the opposition. Although attempts at vote-buying were reported, as were some other minor violations, the January 2013 elections – in contrast to most previous contests – were considered by domestic and international observers to be relatively free of fraud, at least on election day itself. However, the deficient electoral framework was deplored (Carter Center, 2013). To ensure a higher turnout, the registration date was delayed multiple times and voter

---

[2] The exact numbers of Palestinian Jordanians and Transjordanians in the country are not known. Estimations range from 40 percent to 70 percent.

[3] Scholars use different terms for such a system, one of the most commonly used being "mixed-member majoritarian" or "MMM" (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2003, p. 13). This term, however, is problematic in the case of Jordan, where no real party system exists and hence no partisan majority can emerge in the overall results.

[4] This is also why Table 1 below does not show party shares and votes but rather representation, as this gives a better understanding of the election results.

participation was pushed as being vital for the country (EIU, 2012). In contrast to the reactions to previous IAF boycotts (1997 and 2010), the king made more effort to persuade the party to take part in the elections by promising political posts and selective reforms. To further appease the Islamist opposition, the king renewed his ties with the Palestinian Hamas in January 2012 by receiving its leader, Khaled Mash'al, for the first time since the closing of the party's office in Amman in August 1999. Ultimately, however, all attempts to include the IAF in the elections were unsuccessful. To the wider public, the king lobbied – via speeches and, later, the publication of "discussion papers" – for the electoral participation of as many Jordanians as possible.

## 4. Results

A total of 1425 candidates (606 individual candidates and 819 competing on the national lists), almost twice as many as in 2010, contested the 150 seats in parliament's lower house. Of these, around 140 were former members of parliament (MPs) and 191 were women. Voter turnout was 56.6 percent, slightly more than in previous years (it was 54 and 53 percent in the last two elections, 2010 and 2007, respectively) and thus a success for the regime. However, the turnout percentage is calculated on the basis of registered voters, not the eligible electorate. If the latter and larger figure is used as the denominator, the participation rates are considerably less impressive (Table 1). Turnout was substantially higher in the rural districts than in the cities of Amman, Zarqa and Irbid. It is in the rural districts that the competition for posts and vote-buying actually takes place.

As most of the candidates ran as independents, it is hard to tell exactly which blocks have gained how many seats. However, according to estimations, about 75 percent of the new parliament are loyalists, the rest more independent and critical parliamentarians (Halaby and Gavlak, 2013). Of 61 national lists, 23 made it to parliament. Only the Islamic Centrist Party claimed as many as three seats; Homeland and Stronger Jordan each claimed two seats; and the rest of the successful lists claimed only one seat each – meaning that one seat could be won by as few as 14,000 votes (Citizenship) or as many as 49,000 votes (National Current Party).

In addition to the 15 women elected via the quota, two won single-member districts and a further two were elected via the national list; thus parliament now includes the unprecedented number of 19 female MPs. The share of Palestinian MPs went up by 25 percent, making parliament

Table 1
Representation of Jordanian votes, 2013 election.

| | Absolute numbers | Share (%) | Single-vote seats | National-level seats |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Actual voters | 1,288,043 | 41.5 of all eligible | 39.8% | 66.7% |
| Registered voters | 2,272,182 | 73 of all eligible | 22.6% | 37.8% |
| Eligible voters | 3.1 million | 49 of the population | 16.5% | 27.7% |
| Total | – | – | 123 seats 512,838 votes | 27 seats 859,645 votes |

Source: IEC (2013)a, b.

slightly more representative than in previous elections. Saad Hayel Srour, a veteran Transjordanian politician from the Northern Badia, was elected as speaker of parliament.

## 5. Outlook: after the elections, before the protests?

Immediately after the elections, King Abdullah II appointed former prime minister Fayez Tarawneh as chief of the Royal Court, thereby signaling the continuity of his conservative, step-by-step approach. As the king's envoy, Tarawneh held talks during February 2013 with the different parliamentary blocs about the future prime minister and the composition of the government. While some parliamentary blocs declared their support for incumbent prime minister Abdullah Ensour (appointed in October 2012) to remain in place, others did not make clear their preferred candidate. Similarly, parliamentarians differed as to the kind and degree of inclusion of elected parliamentarians in the next government. Overall, the process of government formation was much slower than after previous elections, when the decision was single-handedly taken by the king. Nevertheless, the latter's influence still remains decisive. After a prolonged struggle for a majority, Ensour was finally appointed Prime Minister on March 9, 2013 and began consultations with parliamentary blocks to form his new cabinet which was sworn in on March 30.

In the short term, King Abdullah II appears to be the real winner of the Jordanian parliamentary elections.[5] The largely loyalist parliament, the surprisingly high turnout in spite of all restrictions, the largely positive reports by international election observation missions, as well as the failure of the kingdom's key external financiers – the Gulf monarchies, the USA and the EU – to exert any pressure for reform have given the monarch some political breathing room. However, even a loyalist majority is not a guarantee of absolute acquiescence anymore, as shown by the narrow result of a confidence vote on April 23 in which only 55% supported the government of Ensour showed (Ensour's government wins vote of confidence, n.d.). And as long as discontent continues to seethe in broad sections of Jordanian society, particularly amongst the younger Transjordanians, new protests can be expected in the near future. In the medium term, the people of Jordan may very well vent their growing frustration if the new government fails to master the country's central challenges: political reform, fighting corruption and creating jobs.

## 6. Election note

Not applicable for election notes.

## References

Bank, A., Schlumberger, O., 2004. Jordan: between regime survival and economic reform. In: Perthes, V. (Ed.), Arab Elites. Negotiating the Politics of Change. Lynne Rienner, Boulder, pp. 35–60.
Carter Center, 2013. The Carter Center's Study Mission Report for Jordan's 2013 Parliamentary Elections. Carter Center.

[5] For an overview of different interpretations of the meaning of the elections and their aftermath, see (Valbjørn, 2013).

Clark, J.A., 2010. Questioning power, mobilization, and strategies of the Islamist opposition: how strong is the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan? In: Albrecht, H. (Ed.), Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Political Opposition Under Authoritarianism, pp. 117–137.

EIU, 2012. Country Report Jordan November. Economist Intelligence Unit.

Ensour's government wins vote of confidence [WWW Document], n.d. Jordan Times. URL http://jordantimes.com/ensours-government-wins-vote-of-confidence (accessed 20.08.13.).

Halaby, J, Gavlak, D., 2013. Critics of Jordan's King Perform Well in Election. Yahoo! News. Associated Press. URL http://news.yahoo.com/critics-jordans-king-perform-well-election-184832154.html (accessed 29.01.13.).

IEC, 2013a. Final Results for Local Districts. Independent Election Commission. URL http://www.entikhabat.jo/Public/EntDayAr.aspx?id¼2013&type¼results (accessed 27.02.13.).

IEC, 2013b. Report on Number of Votes and Shares by Governorate. Independent Election Commission.

IRI, 2012. National Priorities, Governance and Political Reform in Jordan (No. 9), National Public Opinion Poll. International Republican Institute/Middle East Marketing and Research Consultants.

Kao, K., 2012. Jordan's Ongoing Election Law Battle. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. URL http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/05/jordan-s-ongoing-election-law-battle/ck59 (accessed 29.01.13.).

Lust, E., 2009. Competitive clientelism in the Middle East. J Democracy 20, 122–135.

Shugart, M., Wattenberg, M.P., 2003. Mixed-member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds? Oxford University Press.

Valbjørn, M., 2013. The 2013 parliamentary elections in Jordan: three Stories and Some General Lessons. Med. Pol. 18, 311–317.