

Jordan:

Politics, Peace Process, and Election Preview

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Nov 6, 1997

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

This marks the third parliamentary election since 1989 and the first since the Jordan-Israel peace treaty. It is important to recall three principles when evaluating the parliamentary experience in Jordan:

1) Democratization has been, from its origin, instrumental-i.e., it was meant to serve other goals. The reconvening of parliament in the 1980s was designed to buttress Jordan's political role in the West Bank; the elections in 1989 were meant to quell popular tension following the rioting provoked by an economic retrenchment plan. The question remains whether democratization in Jordan will obtain a life of its own, or whether it will remain merely instrumental for pursuing the regime's other goals.

2) No matter how liberal Jordan may be, it remains a monarchy, in the traditional sense. Democracy is something given by the king; it is not an inalienable right of the people. There are clear rules of the game that define the parameters of opposition activity. For instance, the Islamic Action Front (IAF)-the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood-has never fielded more than thirty-nine candidates for the 80-seat parliament, lest it never win all its races, find itself with an absolute majority, and therefore be perceived as a threat to the regime.

3) Jordan has historically suffered from the absence of a strong centrist party that represents the bureaucracy, armed forces, and the monarchy (like Egypt's National Democratic Party). Instead, Jordanian politics has highlighted the role of prominent individual leaders, with tribal support, and small ideological parties. Generally, politics in Jordan is a "service industry"-citizens vote for candidates who provide direct personal services, e.g., providing a job, pension, passport, or land grant. This year, there was a much-ballyhooed effort by Abdul Hadi al-Majali, brother of the current prime minister and a former ambassador to the United States, to create a tribal-based, pro-regime centrist party, the National Constitutional Party (NCP). However, this party virtually collapsed a month before the election.

The Current Domestic Context: The November 4 elections are occurring at a contradictory moment in Jordan. Although forecasts predict that the Jordanian economy will grow by 5-6 percent with low inflation through 1998, the public feels poorer than before; just last year townspeople from the East Bank rioted when bread prices were raised. Similarly, U.S.-Jordanian relations have never been better in terms of financial, political, and material aid, but

Jordanians still believe that they are not receiving adequate benefits from their strong support of the Middle East peace process. A "Lackluster" Election: The key feature of the current election is the boycott by major opposition parties-i.e., the Islamic Action Front-and popular politicians, including ex-prime ministers. Ironically, many are boycotting because they view Jordan's "one person, one vote" electoral system as undemocratic. Under the previous "multiple vote, multiple candidate" system, voters would cast the same number of ballots as there were seats in their district. However, this electoral arrangement caused a bundling of votes for certain candidates, particularly from the IAF. As Jordanians' loyalty is first to family and tribe, then to religion, and lastly to ideology, the IAF and other ideological parties suffer when voters may only choose one candidate, which is the new system. Although there are over 500 candidates for 80 parliamentary seats, few are national figures, and most are attempting to take advantage of the absence of most national figures from the balloting. Participation is also likely to be lower than in previous elections as fewer voters have picked up their registration cards. Unfortunately a decline in popular participation hurts the Kingdom in the long-run. In the past, parliaments dominated by pro-regime, traditionalist leaders-the likely winners for this election-have been weak, atomized, and paralyzed politically, often swimming with an anti-regime popular tide. If history is a guide, then chances are likely that this parliament will be short-lived and that the regime will order new elections, probably within a year, after the regime and opposition make some concessions to each other.

Jordan's Relations with Israel: These elections occur in an environment of deepening anxiety in the Jordan-Israel relationship. The core bargain of the peace treaty involved Israel's renunciation of the concept of "Jordan is Palestine" in return for a Jordanian promise to ensure that Jordan would never be a base from which Israel's security could be threatened. Since 1994, official military and political relationships have been relatively warm. However, popular support for normalization has grown frigid. Most importantly, there have been renewed fears, discussed publicly by the king even before the Khalid Mesh'al episode, that the "Jordan is Palestine" idea may not be gone from the Israeli political scene. While almost no Israeli talks of this any more-in fact, a former proponent, Ariel Sharon, has become one of Jordan's biggest boosters-the re-emergence of this concept in the minds of Jordanians is very negative for the future of the peace process, whose success depends in a large part on the Jordanian role.

MARWAN MUASHER

The Opposition Boycott: The boycott is not a positive or desired development on the part of either the regime or the IAF. Jordan has always managed to implement a policy of inclusion based on pluralism and the pursuit of political objectives through peaceful means. Even voluntary exclusion by a major force in parliament disrupts the continuity of the system and disturbs the healthy checks and balances in the government. Even citizens who oppose the Islamists agree that the opposition's presence contributes to better government. Parliament has served as an important arena for voicing concerns, and the perception of parliament as a "rubber stamp" harms the evolution of a democratic system in Jordan. One positive development is that the boycott by opposition parties has not resulted in a similar widespread boycott among voters.

The Jordanian parliament has assumed a greater role in legislating and monitoring the executive branch in the last eight years, but there has not yet been adequate time for the evolution of a strong party system in the country. Jordanians have never liked political parties; indeed, other than the Islamists, Jordan has no major political party. In fact, of more than 500 candidates, only twenty-five are running on a party ticket. Tribalism remains a much more important political force than party affiliation.

Absence of Political Issues: Voter registration in rural areas remains higher than in the cities; 62 percent of voters registered in the third district of Amman (an elite, highly educated region) as compared to 99 percent of voters in some of the Bedouin regions. Although the boycott explains part of this discrepancy, this reaction by voters is generally an expression of apathy to issues other than "bread and butter" concerns. Even the peace process is

essentially a non-issue in the election.

The "one person, one vote" law is supported by a clear majority of Jordanians. Even so, the present government is proposing the division of Jordan into eighty districts in light of criticism that there should be single-seat constituencies so that each voter casts a ballot that has equal weight throughout the country. (Currently, some districts are allowed to send more representatives to parliament than others.) More generally, it is important to understand that Jordan is undergoing three parallel reform processes at the same time-political liberalization, economic restructuring, and improved relations with Israel. When things are not progressing along one of these tracks, forces inside Jordan call for a slow-down of all three.

Women in Jordanian Politics: Although Jordan has one of the highest education rates in the Arab world, women have not been successful in elections. In 1989, twelve female candidates ran, but none won; in 1993, one out of three women candidates won. Recently, there has been a surge in women's rights across the country aided by both local and international women's groups. In the 1997 election, seventeen women are running, including two from the Bedouin region. However, only two have meaningful chances to win.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Ingber. ❖

Policy #276

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Facing Syria's Food Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

[\(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Jordan \(/policy-analysis/jordan\)](#)