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Jordan Goes to the Polls: A Comeback for the Muslim Brotherhood?

by [David Schenker](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Although the parliament remains a marginal institution, the Brotherhood's ability to continue mobilizing political support despite a recent ban shows its persistent appeal in the kingdom.

Recent polls indicate that turnout for Jordan's September 20 parliamentary elections will be low, likely because the people have long viewed that institution as ineffective and irrelevant. Nevertheless, the contest will be a significant test of strength for Jordan's Islamists. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- the political wing of the kingdom's banned Muslim Brotherhood (MB) branch -- boycotted the previous two national elections, but it has agreed to participate tomorrow based on the new election law.

CHANGING ELECTION LAWS

When Jordan held free nationwide parliamentary elections in 1989 -- its first such vote in three decades -- the IAF won 34 of 80 seats. To forestall a repeat of that impressive showing, King Hussein amended the election law in 1993 from a "multiple seat, multiple vote" format to a "multiple seat, single vote" format, essentially forcing voters to prioritize tribal allegiances over political and ideological preferences. The IAF took only 17 seats in that year's elections, then boycotted the 1997 and 2003 contests, complaining that the one-vote system was "undemocratic."

In 2012, the election law was changed again to give the people an additional vote for political parties, but the IAF still

sat out the subsequent year's elections. This March, however, King Abdullah II endorsed a multiple-vote law that won praise from Islamists, paving the way for the group's participation.

While malapportionment -- the gerrymandering that favors so-called "East Bankers" of tribal origin over "West Bankers" of Palestinian origin -- remains an issue, the new law is a significant departure from its predecessor in many other ways. Under the 2012 law, voters in forty-five constituencies cast one ballot each for an individual and one for a closed party list. Twenty-seven seats in the 150-member legislature were allocated to party lists, with quotas for women, Christians, Circassians, and Bedouin. The new law keeps the quotas largely the same but decreases the parliament's size to 130 seats and the number of constituencies to twenty-three. The biggest change, however, is the shift toward a party-based system -- Jordanians can now cast three to seven votes for individuals in open party lists in their districts (i.e., they will vote for both a list and however many candidates their district is allocated from that same list).

Despite its complexity, the new law was widely applauded by the international community and Jordanian reformers alike, who believed it could nudge the country toward a more effective, issues-focused parliament dominated by a few competing blocs. But this kind of transition seems unlikely. For thing, having 230 lists of nearly 1,300 candidates competing for 130 seats almost ensures a parliament packed with dozens of disparate parties. Moreover, with only fifteen days to campaign, candidates have not been concentrating on issues related to "citizen services" that impact people's "life priorities," according to a September 12 report in *al-Ghad* newspaper. Polling conducted in April by the International Republican Institute suggests voters are especially concerned about economic issues --nearly 70 percent say the economy is "bad" or "very bad," pointing to high prices, unemployment, and low wages as the biggest problems. Yet few of the candidates and parties have uploaded their manifestos on such issues to Facebook, the kingdom's most widely used social media outlet.

In short, much of the next legislature will likely be composed of politicians with individual agendas, not large blocs defined by unifying principles or platforms. The notable exception is the IAF, which promises to emerge with the largest bloc.

THE NEW ISLAMIST LANDSCAPE

Much has changed in Jordanian political Islam since the previous elections, when the IAF was still boycotting and the relatively unknown Islamist party al-Wasat took 19 seats, the largest parliamentary bloc at the time. Key developments since then include:

- *The Zamzam Initiative.* In 2012, former senior MB official Rohile Gharaibeh founded a new nationalist/Islamist organization, apparently with government backing. The Zamzam Initiative, as it is known, has since been working to establish itself as a moderate, pro-government, locally focused alternative to the Palestine-focused, pro-Hamas MB. Its political wing is known as the National Congress Party (NCP).
- *A Brotherhood divided.* The MB has long struggled with internal fissures between primarily tribal East Banker "doves" and more hardline Palestinian-origin "hawks." These divisions became an outright split in April, when the government [declared the organization illegal](#). At the time, Amman issued a license to former MB General Guide Abdul Majid Thunaibat, a perennial "dove" leader, to establish a new party known as the Muslim Brotherhood Society (MBS), then transferred the banned MB's considerable assets to the new organization.
- *Persistence of the old guard MB.* Despite the ban, the MB's political wing -- the IAF-- survived and has emerged as the mainstream standard bearer of the kingdom's Islamists. The IAF electoral ticket is called the National Alliance for Reform (NAR).

ISLAMIST ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

our main Islamist parties will compete in the elections. Al-Wasat will run 16 candidates in loose alliance with

F Zamzam's NCP and the MBS, though the latter two parties will only field a "modest" slate of 20 candidates total in Amman, Irbid, Zarqa, and Aqaba. Meanwhile, the NAR will run 118 candidates on 20 lists across Jordan, including 4 Circassians/Chechens, 5 Christians, and 14 women.

The diversity of the NAR ticket highlights the party's electoral approach, which -- like that of the NCP and MBS -- is largely devoid of religious discourse, focusing instead on reform. In a September 9 interview with the Jordanian Islamist daily *Assabeel*, IAF leader Zaki Bani Irsheid noted that the NAR hopes to attract voters who "want to engage in national action without committing to the principles of the Islamic movement and without obeying the desire and will of official authorities." In addition to broadening its popular appeal, the party's mixed slate will likely help it capture some less-competitive quota seats. In an apparent effort to game the electoral system, the NAR is also running multiple competing tickets in several districts. In Amman's 1st district, for example, it is backing both the "Reform List" with 5 candidates and the "Justice List" with 4.

IMPLICATIONS

As in 2013, the elections will be monitored by international observers and will likely be judged "free and fair." A pre-election assessment conducted by American organizations in August concluded that "conditions for a democratic election process exist."

Nevertheless, Jordanian voters still do not appear to understand the inordinately complex election law, despite an extensive government campaign to educate them. In 2013, nearly 57 percent of registered voters (or 34 percent of all voting-age citizens) cast ballots, but this year's turnout will probably be lower due to confusion about the law, disenchantment with the legislature, concerns about electoral integrity, and general voter apathy. The government's decision to make election day a work holiday is unlikely to change such sentiment. While many local observers initially viewed the electoral changes as a palace-driven effort to strengthen the parliament, much of this optimism turned to disillusionment once they realized that the next legislature may be even more fractious and less effective than ever. In fact, some have come to believe that the new law was actually intended to weaken the parliament. As one local analyst lamented in August, "The palace was smarter than us."

Another key issue to watch will be the performance of the Islamists, particularly the MB remnants in the NAR. The broad consensus among local analysts is that the Alliance will win up to 20 seats, including women and minority quota mandates. In contrast, Zamzam, the MBS, and al-Wasat might win as few as five total. In all, Islamists could garner 25 of 130 seats -- a nearly 20 percent share that would once again give them the largest single bloc in parliament.

Yet while these numbers highlight the ongoing resonance and political clout of the erstwhile old-guard MB, they are unlikely to pose a real challenge to the king or his agenda in parliament, since most or all of the remaining seats will be supportive of the government. In fact, winning a large bloc may provide these Islamists with a safety valve, ensuring that they stay within the system despite increasing pressure from the palace and security apparatus.

Given the marginal role of parliament in Jordanian politics, the elections will at best constitute a symbolic victory for the Islamists. But one thing is clear: five months after the banning of the Muslim Brotherhood, its political progeny is alive and well.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖



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1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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