Jordan's Elections: Incremental Reform amid Regional Turbulence

by David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

Jan 22, 2013

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Brief Analysis

On January 18, 2013, David Schenker, David Makovsky, and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss the Jordanian and Israeli elections. Mr. Schenker, the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at the Institute, formerly served as the Pentagon's top policy aide on Jordan and its neighbors. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. Read Mr. Makovsky's ***observations on the Israeli campaign (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-israeli-election-implications-for-u.s.-policy)*** *or Dr. Satloff's* ***prepared remarks on both countries' broader strategic concerns (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-elections-in-israel-and-jordan-the-ties-that-bind)*** *.*

The January 23 parliamentary elections will be the first in Jordan since the onset of the Arab uprisings. Despite continuing protests throughout the country since 2011, King Abdullah II has weathered the regional turmoil relatively well. Jordan's protests differ from those elsewhere in the Middle East because they focus less on political change than on ending regime corruption and reversing cuts in food and fuel subsidies. These demands have even worn away at the monarchy's traditionally loyal base of East Bankers; the emergence of al-Hirak, a tribally based opposition movement, is unprecedented and may have a greater impact on the kingdom in the future. In response, the palace has taken care to avoid great violence, sidestepping the cycle of funerals and demonstrations that generated large crowds in other states.

King Abdullah has also been pursuing political reform since 2011, when he set forth real but limited constitutional changes. More recently, the government has addressed calls to update the electoral law. The previous system was established following the 1989 "multiple seat, multiple vote" elections in which Islamist independents won twenty-two of an available eighty parliamentary seats. In 1993, following the implementation of a "one man, one vote" system, Islamists won only seventeen seats, presumably because voters were more likely to vote along tribal rather than ideological lines when given only one vote to cast. Since then, Islamists have periodically boycotted elections while tribal groups have worked hard to maximize their electoral advantage and mobilize voters. As a result, traditionalist East Bank elites -- always a powerful force -- have dominated parliamentary life.

Gerrymandering of legislative districts has also ensured that East Banker loyalists are better represented than Palestinians. For instance, Karak governorate, with a mostly tribal population of around 240,000, currently has ten parliamentary seats while Zarqa, a Palestinian-majority governorate with nearly one million citizens, has only eleven. Given this clear political imbalance, the electoral law has been a contentious issue for decades.

The government has been slowly implementing parliamentary reforms since 2007, when it expanded the number of seats from 80 to 110. In 2010, the total was increased to 120. The latest electoral law, passed in June 2012, established a mixed electoral system with 150 parliamentary seats. For the first time, citizens are now able to vote for a closed national list of 27 seats in addition to the 108 reserved for the kingdom's twelve governorates. And the women's quota, in place since 2003, has been raised from 12 to 15 seats, with the new spots reserved for Bedouin. To oversee the transparency of the process, respected former foreign minister Abdul Ilah Khatib was appointed to head a new Independent Election Commission, and international observers were invited to supervise the voting as they did in 2010. Most significant, the king has pledged that the largest parliamentary bloc will form the next government, a privilege traditionally reserved for the king himself.

Despite these changes, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, regards the new electoral law (like the previous one) as undemocratic. Specifically, it rejects the limited number of seats allocated to the national list and continues to oppose the "one man, one vote" principle used for the district lists. Perhaps emboldened by Islamist gains elsewhere in the region, the IAF has advocated a mixed law allocating 50 percent of the seats to the national list and 50 percent to the districts. Last July, the group announced that it would again boycott the elections. Awn Khasawneh, the prime minister tasked with formulating the new law, seemingly agreed; he resigned shortly after the changes took effect in June and criticized the palace's commitment to reform. This was highly unusual; although Jordanian prime ministers often step down before their tenure is up, they generally do so after being dismissed by the king.

Even without the IAF's participation, the electoral landscape is vast. Nearly 1,500 candidates are competing for the 135 nonquota seats, with 61 parties comprising 867 candidates for the 27-seat national list alone. Most of these factions, including the likely successful National Current Party, are a mixture of nationalist and socialist candidates running against subsidy cuts and corruption. One of the few Islamist parties still running, al-Wasat al-Islami, may appeal to some constituencies with its heavy focus on Palestine and corruption, but its power to bring voters to the polls remains to be seen given the IAF boycott.

Perhaps the most colorful character to emerge from the campaign is Shibley Haddad, a Christian candidate from Madaba who, among other things, promises to find oil in Jordan, keep gas prices the same, and liberate Palestine. If nothing else, he has kept Jordanians interested in the vote; *al-Ghad* columnist Fahd Khitan even claimed that Haddad's uniqueness saved the elections from "becoming a failure."

Despite the government's attempts to hold a transparent, credible election, criticism of the electoral law has been nearly universal, and reports of corruption continue. A recent story in *al-Hayat* discussed the epidemic of vote buying, quoting an undisclosed source warning that Khatib would resign unless steps were taken to curtail the problem; over the past few days, several high-profile arrests have been made. Additionally, a few months ago, Chief of the Royal Court Riyad Abu Karaki met with Jordanian United Front head Amjad Majali and dozens of other members of parliament. The public was scandalized, viewing this as a palace attempt to determine the next government beforehand. Whether or not such stories hold weight, they have not engendered confidence in the reform process. In Karak and other tribal towns, for example, Hirak activists have reportedly burned hundreds of election cards in protest of corruption.

Still, the kingdom has seemingly set the stage for a free and fair election day, at least in procedural terms. The key issue to watch will be voter turnout. The number and variety of candidates could drive Jordanians to the polls

despite the IAF boycott. Yet given that only two million of the country's nearly four million eligible voters are registered, even a respectable 50 percent turnout would mean that a mere fraction of the country's voting-age population participated. Higher turnout would assuage concerns about the character of the new parliament, greatly improve domestic perceptions regarding the credibility of the elections, and ease pressure -- at least temporarily -- on the palace.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Katie Kiraly. ❖

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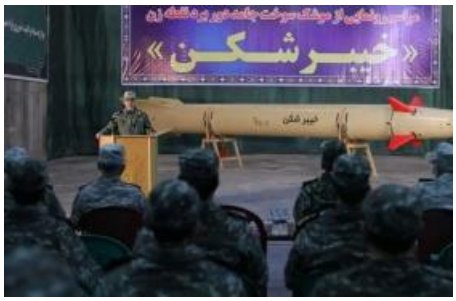

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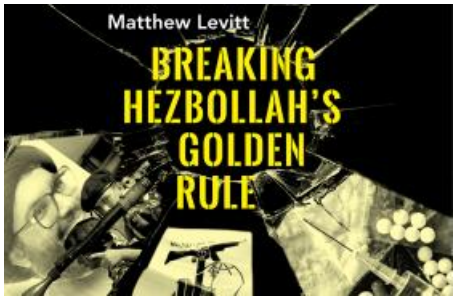

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