

## Egypt Should Learn from Jordan at the Polls

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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On November 9, Jordan conducted its first-ever parliamentary elections monitored by domestic and international observers. I was one of the observers and was impressed by the transparency of the process. Indeed, notwithstanding some isolated incidents of violence, the elections themselves set a regional gold-standard for free and fair balloting.

When Egypt goes to the polls on November 28, it will do so in the shadow of Jordanian elections hailed by the International Republican Institute monitoring team as "a significant step forward." It's unlikely that Egypt's balloting will compare favorably.

It was not a foregone conclusion that Jordanian elections would be credible: the 2007 parliamentary contest was almost universally criticized as fraudulent. And this year, Freedom House's annual survey of Freedom in the World downgraded Jordan from "partially free" to "not free." At the same time, in the run-up to Election Day, Human Rights Watch reported widespread arrests and media censorship.

Despite the kingdom's democracy deficit, King Abdullah II agreed to international monitors. No doubt the unprecedented decision was made easier by the fact that the Islamist opposition was boycotting the race. Indeed, monitors were critical to stave off this Islamist attempt to embarrass the monarchy. At the end of the day, though, it seems the king calculated that a technocratic legislature with national legitimacy would not only increase the public's investment in and identification with the institution, but also possibly increase its effectiveness.

Although Jordan has a population of 6.5 million and Egypt 86 million, the two have much in common in terms of governance. Like the monarchy in Jordan, Egypt's leader Hosni Mubarak, who has ruled for nearly thirty years, faces no term limit other than mortality. As in Jordan, the last several elections in Egypt have been marked by low turnout -- an estimated five percent of voters participated in the June 2010 contest for the upper house -- and were marred by violence and irregularities. And while Egypt's Islamists are not boycotting as Jordan's did, their participation in the upcoming elections has been greatly circumscribed.

Washington has pressed Cairo as well as Amman to accept international observers in its parliamentary elections. (Some say that President Obama himself has even weighed in with Mubarak). And recently, in an effort to ensure the "integrity" of the elections, the Obama administration requested that the government of Egypt allow peaceful gatherings and free media coverage of the event. To date, however, Cairo has rejected demands for international monitors, just as it continues to prevent public gatherings, block SMS messaging, push to remove opposition newspaper editors, and jam unsympathetic television stations.

Egypt has approved in theory the deployment of local monitors in the elections, a decision that U.S. ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey commended as "a very important component of assuring a free and fair and transparent election." However, in contrast to Jordan, the credentialing of these monitors by the Ministry of the Interior will be highly selective, restricted to less-independent employees of government-sponsored non-governmental organizations (or GONGOs).

Absent international monitors, it is all but certain that Cairo's perennially fraudulent elections will continue. While stacking parliament with even more regime allies may ensure a smoother political succession when 82-year-old president Hosni Mubarak departs from the scene, it will do little to enhance the legitimacy of the legislature and the regime. More likely -- given the predicted abysmal turnout -- it will further add to the alienation of Egypt's youth and increase support for the Islamists who constitute the state's most coherent political opposition force.

Instead of continuing down this authoritarian road, Egypt might consider learning from Jordan's electoral experience. Both King Abdullah and the Mubarak regime have been enthusiastic about economic reform while resisting political reform. Accordingly, Washington has over time lowered its expectations on this front. While transparent elections are no substitute for democracy, the legitimacy that issues from transparent elections constitutes a small step forward on the road to political reform.

After 30 years of Mubarak, and now the prospect of hereditary succession, state legitimacy in Egypt is extremely low. At the same time, in recent years, Egypt has witnessed an unprecedented number of political demonstrations and labor strikes. Rather than return to the customary practice of sending out the troops on November 28, Cairo should send in the monitors -- both independent domestic observers and international ones. Should Egyptian elections be assessed as free and fair, Egypt -- like Jordan -- will win international praise. More importantly, the regime might just improve its stature at home.

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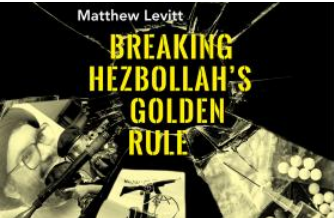


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