Jordan's New Election Law:

New Tactics, Old Strategy?

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

Jul 26, 2001

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Schenker (/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

Brief Analysis

This week, Jordan's King Abdullah took two major decisions that will have significant implications for the kingdom's complicated and often troubled relations with its Palestinian and Islamist communities. Last Sunday, Abdullah approved a new election law; two days later, he issued a decree indefinitely postponing parliamentary elections. Taken together, these moves appear designed to bolster the stability of the kingdom, though it is still too early to assess whether the regime wins or loses from these parliamentary gambits.

Background

In 1989, Jordan held its first free nationwide parliamentary election in thirty-three years, and the Muslim Brotherhood's political party -- the Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- fared extremely well, winning 34 of 80 seats. To forestall another such stellar performance, in 1993, King Hussein amended the election law from a "multiple seat, multiple vote" format to a "multiple seat, single vote" format. Left with only one ballot, Jordanian voters prioritized their tribal allegiances over their political and ideological preferences, and the Islamists lost out. In the subsequent elections, the IAF took only 17 seats.

The Islamists cried foul. Complaining that the one-vote system was "undemocratic," IAF leaders demanded that Hussein redraft the law. When he refused, the Islamists boycotted the 1997 elections. Rather than enhance their position, however, the boycott backfired and left the Islamists more marginalized than before. Recognizing their error, Islamists started to press King Abdullah -- after his coronation in 1999 -- to revisit the election law, and the one-vote system in particular. In June 2000, Abdullah tasked his newly appointed prime minister Ali Abul Ragheb to conduct a "national dialogue" about the elections law. Then last month, in a move that paved the way for a postponement of elections and set the stage for the drafting of a revised law, the king dissolved parliament **(see PeaceWatch no. 334). (templateC05.php?CID=2025)** The new elections law was completed within a month, and ratified by Abdullah on July 23.

The postponement and electoral reform came on the heels of nearly ten months of Israeli-Palestinian violence, an atmosphere that has contributed to domestic unrest and a continued economic malaise in the Kingdom. This, in

turn, has tilted the delicate balance of economic and political reform that has characterized the reign of Abdullah.

New Law

The new election law reflects both continuity and change. Many of the fundamental prescriptions of the law in terms of candidacy, campaign procedures, and voting eligibility -- such as the odd regulation that denies soldiers and policemen the right to vote -- remained intact. Likewise, and most controversially, so did the prescription regarding the one-vote system.

At the same time, changes were made to reflect what King Abdullah has referred to as a "modern" election system. Per the new law, for example, paper voting cards are slated for replacement with high-tech, German-made magnetic voting cards. Likewise, the voting age was lowered from nineteen to eighteen years old. Most of the significant changes in the law, however, involved redistricting and reallocation of seat apportionments.

In this context, the new law increased the number of constituencies from 21 to 45 -- effectively making the voting areas smaller. The law also increased the number of seats allocated to the twelve governorates. These increases included 5 additional seats for Amman, 3 additional seats for both Zarqa and Irbid, and 2 extra representatives for Balqaa. Most of the remaining districts were provided one additional seat. To accommodate these new representatives, the size of the parliament was increased from 80 to 104 members.

Winners and Losers

Although it is probably too early to tell, judging from the apportionment of the additional 24 seats, Jordanians of Palestinian origin appear to be the primary beneficiaries of the new law. Palestinians in Jordan, believed to comprise at least 60 percent of the population, have long maintained that they are underrepresented at the highest levels of government. As such, it is significant that Amman, Zarqa, and Irbid -- governorates known for high Palestinian population densities -- received the largest proportion of the newly allocated seats. This choice may indicate a government effort to redress a historic wrong; conversely, it might merely be an attempt to placate a large and disaffected segment of the population. Regardless of the rationale behind the decision, Palestinian Jordanians will likely have more sympathetic legislators after the next elections.

But while Palestinians appear to be the winners, it is harder to determine the "losers." Despite appearances, are the Islamists really the losers in these latest developments? Primarily, the answer to this question lies in an understanding of the shifting Palestinian vote: from leftist parties that are historically tied to Palestinian nationalist movements, to Islamist parties like Hamas that emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood in the Balance

The Muslim Brotherhood was incensed that the one-vote system was not changed. After four lean years with little political influence, though, the IAF is still inclined to participate. The situation was perhaps best summarized by Muslim Brotherhood leader Abdel Majid Thunaybat, who pointed out that, while "we dread remaining in the present boycott, it's hard to convince those calling for the boycott to rescind their decision." Given the experience of the boycott, it appears that the Islamists are currently leaving the door open for participation. Indeed, only yesterday, IAF spokesman Jamil Abu Bakr publicly hinted at his party's preference, saying the decision would "not depend solely on the issue of one-vote."

If the IAF needed any further encouragement to participate, on July 12 a new pro-government party called the "Islamist Centrist Party" headed by former IAF deputy Bassam al Amoush held a press conference in Amman to announce its establishment. The Islamist Centrist Party advocates tolerance, pluralism, democracy, and a fierce loyalty to the regime combined with a vituperative disdain for Israel. The party also appears to have some close government ties.

Co-opt and Coerce

The new electoral law suggests that King Abdullah is attempting to continue a policy of limiting Islamist political representation while not alienating the rest of the kingdom's Palestinian population. This is an interesting policy, particularly given that in recent years the IAF -- perhaps the only Jordanian political party with both East and West Banker support -- has served as a primary outlet for the Palestinian vote. Based on this crossover, it is not clear that the Islamists can be sacrificed in exchange for the Palestinians. Indeed, if the last elections are any indication, Palestinians are more likely to vote for Islamists than secular/leftist Palestinians. In 1993 -- the last elections prior to the boycott -- throughout Jordan only fourteen Jordanians of Palestinian origin were elected to Parliament; nine of these Palestinians were Islamist.

Reforms in the electoral law could be a regime tactic intended to drive wedges in the Islamist community, potentially splitting the "moderate" East Banker Islamists from their younger, more militant Palestinian colleagues. In effect, by affording Palestinian districts more seats, the king may be encouraging Palestinians to vote for less threatening leftist parties with Palestinians in leadership roles, rather than for the more problematic Islamist party, the IAF.

King Abdullah's foray into the murky world of redistricting -- "gerrymandering" to some -- is reminiscent of some of the tactics practiced by King Hussein. But in a larger sense, it is also part of the overall strategy of co-optation and coercion conducted by Hussein during his nearly five-decade reign. Only next summer, when elections are widely expected, will it be possible to assess the wisdom of King Abdullah's strategy.

David Schenker is a research fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #546

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)