

# ELECTIONWATCH

## JORDAN



### Jordan Pre-Election Watch: November 2010 Parliamentary Elections

The development of democratic institutions in Jordan will see a new chapter on November 9 as voters head to the polls to elect a new lower house of Jordan's bicameral national assembly. The elections follow a series of major initiatives undertaken in the past year at the direction of Jordan's King Abdullah. Whether the new parliament is viewed in a more positive light than its predecessor will depend largely on increased public confidence in the institution's ability to address basic economic, cost-of-living and social issues impacting the Hashemite Kingdom. Regardless, the November 9 elections should be watched as they are the first elections conducted under a new electoral law, and the first time Jordan will allow international observers to witness elections.

### Background

Last November, King Abdullah unexpectedly dissolved parliament and his government and called for elections to be held no later than the end of 2010. The dismissal came at a time when parliament's popularity had fallen to its lowest levels; IRI [polling results from a poll fielded August 8-11, 2009](#), confirmed more than 50 percent were not satisfied with the performance of the parliament and 42 percent did not believe it was representative of Jordanians. Jordanians were also disinclined to trust parliament due to irregularities involved during 2007 elections, such as allegations of vote buying and illegal transfer of votes. Following the government's dissolution, the King quickly constituted a new government by appointing a new set of ministers, and charged this government with developing a new electoral law.

After nearly seven months of deliberation, the Jordanian government endorsed a new law, keeping the controversial "one-man one-vote" system and increasing the number of parliamentary seats from 110 to 120, including 12 reserved for women. The increase in women's representation is a doubling of the previous women's quota. Critics say the system, maintained under the new election law, will increase the influence of tribes in electoral politics and further weaken the role of political parties. Of the four other seats created, two have been allocated to the capital, Amman, and one each to the cities of Zarqa and Irbid. These additional seats are expected to raise the representation of Jordanians of Palestinian origin in parliament.

The only formidable political party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), declared a boycott of the November 9 elections citing a "lack of genuine desire for reform" on the part of the government. The IAF boycott is largely the result of frustration with the results of the 2007 elections, and the perception of party leadership that the previous government failed to deliver on its promise of electoral reform. Media speculation is that voter turnout will be low and that the move to boycott reflects a public frustration that goes beyond the specific demands of the IAF.

As the only political party to hold seats in the previous parliament, since all other members were elected independent from party affiliation, the IAF boycott has generated controversy both outside and within the party. When the IAF's *shoura* council met in late July, its members passed the boycott decision with only 52 percent of the vote, reflecting differences of opinion in the different wings of the party. Interestingly, despite the party ban on electoral participation, some IAF candidates have broken rank and are running at the request of their respective tribes.

There is confusion among the electorate about what the new election law means for the administration of elections. In addition, IRI polling indicates the electorate remains cynical about the ability of parliament to affect meaningful change.

Despite the frustration and confusion, Jordan's pre-election climate has been dynamic with more than 870 candidates registered to run for parliament and a strong voter registration and adjudication period. By the end of August, more than 420,000 objections to the voter lists were logged with the Civil Status and Passports Department, the department responsible for maintaining the voter registry. The Jordanian government audited the names and validated more than 165,000 objections and for the first time the government published the final voter lists. This represents a real effort to increase transparency.

Also for the first time, Jordan will allow international observers to witness the November 9 elections and has put into place a Jordanian code of conduct for international observers as well as a system to credential observers. International observers will join a growing number of domestic observers from Jordan's civil society at polling places on Election Day.

## What's at Stake?

The election of the lower house of parliament (the *majlis al-nuwaab*) has the potential to represent a watershed moment in the development of democratic institutions in Jordan; however, such a turning point is not expected in these elections. Though Freedom House in 2006 called Jordan the "the Arab World's most promising experiment in political liberalization and reform," these elections will not alter the status-quo in Jordan since candidates elected largely on tribal affiliation and as independents is the most likely outcome. Nonetheless, Jordan should be commended for self-directed advances towards participatory democracy.

On the path to increased openness, the credibility of the Jordanian government to hold open and transparent elections and the credibility of parliament as an institution are at stake. A common held opinion among the majority of Jordanians is that the 2007 parliamentary elections were not free, fair or transparent. The November 9 elections represent an opportunity to show Jordan is committed to administering open and transparent elections. If this is the case, the new parliament will begin its work with a stronger mandate and the potential to further democratic reforms.

Jordan's struggling political parties are not expected to fare well in the elections, as parties remain largely ineffective and lack popular bases of citizen support. For political parties to be successful, improved strategies to disseminate voter-targeted messages to the grassroots through local membership are necessary. Unfortunately, a common theme from IRI-supported party-specific focus groups indicates a strong hesitancy among party activists to believe their parties are relevant organizations capable of addressing issues of concern or impacting

meaningful change.

## The Campaign and Its Major Themes

On the surface, the pre-election environment is lively and reminiscent in some aspects of a modern parliamentary campaign. The capital city of Amman is plastered with candidate posters, replete with pictures and a variety of messages. Trucks roll through the streets with blow-horns announcing short slogans for various candidates. Many candidates are on national television or participate in debates with their opponents.

Although vibrant, the campaign period has been overshadowed by a consistent failing of candidates and political parties to address pressing issues in their platforms and messages. Based on widespread frustration remaining from the ineffectiveness of the previous parliament, the majority of candidates are running on anti-corruption platforms and the idea they will be a "national member of parliament" who cares about the future of the country as a whole. Few candidates are concentrating on bread and butter issues that resonate with voters. Rather than talking about bringing jobs and economic development to their representative districts, candidates are focused on topics such as solving regional geopolitical disputes - issues over which candidates will likely have little or no influence. When asked, a vast majority of Jordanians understand that a member of parliament cannot solve all of their problems; rather they seek realistic pledges to solve manageable problems in their communities.

Compounding this problem is the fundamental lack of understanding of the role of a parliamentarian, both by the electorate and the candidates themselves. Recent IRI polling of six parliamentary election districts found that more than half of respondents didn't know the responsibilities with which a parliamentarian is charged, and less than a third of respondents are confident that the upcoming elections will be free, fair and transparent. Anecdotally, at a recent IRI-sponsored candidate debate one audience member asked the candidates to detail the legislative process. None of the candidates were able to articulate to the audience how a bill becomes a law.

Despite a genuine desire for reform on the part of many candidates participating in this year's elections, many remnants of the dominant tribal system remain entrenched. Unfortunately, most candidates turn to tribal connections and pre-arranged deals to ensure a seat in parliament. Relying on centuries-old habits among tribes results in greater voter discontent and erodes the gradual gains that have been made in the development of democratic institutions under the Jordanian system.

## Possible Outcomes

Most likely there will be few surprises coming out of the November 9 parliamentary elections. In light of the IAF boycott, the number of seats held by political parties will be minimal, if there are any at all. The greatest likelihood is that individual tribal candidates will be elected due to promises of election support made well ahead of Election Day.

The greatest uncertainty in outcome is the role that virtual sub-districts created under Jordan's new electoral law may play. Confusing to both voters and international observers alike, the virtual sub-districts are not defined by a geographic area as is the case with representative

districts in other systems. Rather, under the virtual sub-district system, there will be multiple candidates within a geographic district. Voters will vote for any one candidate in any one district, and the results will be apportioned according to the sub-district in which the candidate was running. There is currently no map or definition of where sub-districts lie within the districts. Precisely how the process will work and what role the virtual sub-districts may play remains extremely unclear.

Critics of the system assail the sub-districts as being a backdoor for manipulation of election results if the desired outcome is not achieved. International human rights and democracy organizations are watching the outcome to determine whether or not this will be the case, though such manipulation will be extremely difficult to prove.

Another factor important for the November 9 elections' outcome is voter participation. The IAF boycott could significantly depress voter turnout leading to a new parliament elected with less votes than the previous parliament. Although the elections may be an administrative improvement from previous electoral experiments in Jordan, low national turnout would potentially undermine administrative reforms and other improvements associated with the November 9 elections.

The coming elections and new parliament will be key to setting the tone for future reforms in the Kingdom, including decentralization and municipal elections expected for spring 2011. A process that is transparent and seen by Jordanians as an administrative improvement with solid voter participation is the best possible outcome for Jordan's current and future reform prospects.

## IRI in Jordan

Since 2005, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has focused on connecting citizens and government by promoting good governance, strong political parties and public opinion research. IRI grassroots-focused activities encourage democratic participation on the national and sub-national levels by politically engaging civil society, particularly women and youth, and preparing political parties and candidates for elections.

Governance programs help local civil society groups connect with their governments by involving them in decision-making processes and encouraging governments to be more responsive and accountable to constituencies. Program activities include civil society advocacy training, citizen sponsored issue-forums, mayors' roundtable discussions, and training for mayors and their staff on constituent relations and communications.

IRI also provides regular technical assistance to political parties and candidates. IRI organizes trainings to help parties and candidates develop more effective platforms, campaigns, political messages and internal communications plans.

Activities are supported by regular public opinion research at the national and municipal level, helping focus government officials and key decision-makers on pressing issues.



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