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Country Report

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Daring More Democracy in Jordan

In the Shadow of the War in Gaza, the Hashemite Kingdom Elects a New Parliament

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Jordan seems more than ever committed to encourage its citizens to participate in politics – although in a carefully crafted way and under strict state supervision. The parliamentary elections on September 10 are a milestone in the “political modernization” that King Abdullah initiated three years ago – and a sparkle of hope for more democracy.

In view of the terror attacks of October 7, the devastation of the Gaza Strip and the constant fear of a further regional escalation of violence in the Middle East, the question of the internal constitution of Arab states has been pushed into the background. There may have been no talk of democracy for a long time. But the questions once raised during the “Arab Spring” about governance and about how to organise public life remain unanswered in many places – and a potential source of unrest in an already geopolitically instable region.

It is the usually rather inconspicuous Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan that is currently attempting a response that it calls “political modernization”, and which will have to pass its baptism of fire with the parliamentary elections on September 10, 2024.

Political modernization “from above”

It all started three years ago, when King Abdullah convened a reform committee. It was tasked with proposing on how to increase citizens' political participation and gradually develop the kingdom into a genuine parliamentary monarchy. The 92 members were hand-picked but represented the entire breadth of the political spectrum – and did their job: In May 2022, based on their recommendations, new party and electoral laws entered into force.

The reformed legal framework primarily takes political parties out of the periphery into which they had been pushed for decades in Jordan. The new party law explicitly prohibits discrimination based

on party membership. For the first time, parties are allowed to be active at universities. A complicated quota system, which requires not only nationwide membership but also a minimum participation of women, young people, and people with disabilities, is intended to improve political party representation.

The new electoral law also seems technical but amounts to a small revolution for the long quite rigid political system in the kingdom. Until now, Jordanians only voted for their constituency candidate – usually an influential personality who was trusted to stand up for their own everyday concerns in Amman. As a result, parliament rather resembled an assembly of ombudsmen. Although it has always also been a stage for public and sometimes controversial political debates, parliament was ultimately never able to fully take on its legislative role and overseeing the government. In the entire current legislative period, 15 legislative initiatives came from parliament, with only one actually implemented. After the last election four years ago, only around a dozen MPs were even party members. Parliamentary group work was almost non-existent.

In addition to the vote for local candidate, the new electoral law now introduces a second vote, which is used for a national list. Each national list is put forward by a political party or a coalition of parties. Here, too, we have a quota system. The first three and the following three places on the list must each include a woman, and the first five places must include a candidate under the age of 35. In

addition, as used to be the case before, a minimum number of seats is guaranteed for minorities such as Christians. 41 of the total 138 parliamentary seats will be awarded to candidates on the nation-wide party lists. Since this time around, half of the candidates in constituencies are also running under a party banner, the new parliament will undoubtedly be the most "political" since the early 1990s, when parties were allowed again after decades of martial law.

But Jordan, a demographically diverse, resource-poor country that has been carefully and skilfully navigating the turmoil of the Middle East for a hundred years, and which is squeezed in by larger powers and regional conflicts, would not be Jordan if this legal step towards democratization did not come with all kinds of safety nets.

Participation and Control

Firstly, the process is gradual. The desired parties-driven politicization of parliament is to happen over three election cycles, i.e. more than a decade. During that period, the number of seats allocated to the party lists will be gradually increased. This is already enshrined in law, but laws can of course be changed. Secondly, a legal link between the election result and the formation of a government has been avoided. The King is still completely free in choosing the government. He thus does not have to appoint a prime minister from the party that performs best in the elections, as has been the case in Morocco since 2011. But he could do it – now or one day, when he sees the time is right. The government does indeed need a vote of confidence from parliament, but in monarchist Jordan, this rather used to be a formality.

The third safety net is a constitutional one. At the same time as the party and electoral law were reformed, a number of constitutional amendments were made – without much public debate. They formally transferred some competences that previously lay *de jure* with the government or the prime minister to the king. This applies above all to the domain of foreign policy and the appointment of top state officials. So, if there should ever be a party-dominated government that is – from the point of view of the palace and the establishment – about to act against fundamental national

interests, it will certainly not be able to outpace the king who remains the guardian of what he defines as the supreme interest of the state.

This cautious approach is met with approval even by some liberal and democracy-oriented Jordanians, who otherwise would fear an excessive rise of populist or Islamist forces, which they believe could then endanger the stability of the country – whether in terms of internal peace or foreign policy orientation. And indeed, The Islamic Action Front, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, has long been considered to be by far the strongest party in the country.

In the meantime, however, with at least indirect state support, new centrist parties have emerged, some with a more conservative, others with a more social-democratic touch. These have been able to build up a relatively broad membership base and attract well-known personalities in a short space of time. It is surely no coincidence that the two most prominent of these parties are led by former ministers. Overall, the number of party members in Jordan has increased fivefold since the start of "political modernization" in 2021, to currently almost 100,000.

Since the election campaign began a few weeks ago, Jordan's cities have been plastered with posters. For the first time, the state television station Al-Mamlaka has organized thematic debates among party leaders. Government authorities are urging Jordanians to vote, with online campaigns and a flood of text messages on their cell phones. Election day, a Tuesday, was declared a holiday.

Within political circles and especially among young people who already have been interested in politics, one can clearly discern a certain enthusiasm for the new era of "political modernization." But many Jordanians remain sceptical – according to surveys, this is still the majority.¹ The mistrust that the state has long shown towards political activism is obviously deeply rooted in the collective memory. Why should something that might previously have led to disadvantages in one's career or some form of bureaucratic harassment suddenly be considered right?

In fact, the serious efforts to expand political participation have so far not been accompanied by an expansion of critical discursive spaces, for example by strengthening freedom of expression – on the contrary, say international human rights organizations. Freedom House, for example, has since 2021 downgraded Jordan from "partly free" to "not free" in its global freedom ranking, which refers to political rights and civil liberties.² Among other things, a law to combat cybercrime that was passed in a hurry last year strengthens the powers of the security authorities. Some fear that they can also be used against voices that are critical of the government.³

Most recently, the remarkable protests in Jordan over the recent war in Gaza have led to the arrests of activists who are demanding that their country takes a much tougher stance towards Israel and who have been accused of disturbing public order.⁴ In addition, the new registration of parties that is required by the reform of the party law gives the authorities another tool of control. One of the most prominent opposition parties, the Rescue and Partnership Party, failed due to formal hurdles, but suspected a political motivation behind it. In any case, it cannot take part in the upcoming election.

All of this can challenge the credibility of the political reform process. The election campaign also shows that Jordan still has at least one foot stuck in the old system. The candidates are more important than issues, and many slogans remain abstract. Some of the recently founded parties have not yet been able to develop sophisticated programs. A good part of the old elite has simply put on a new political party cloak and is running for election again. The declared goal of substantially reducing the number of parties and creating an ideologically clear and content-based party landscape has not yet been achieved. 38 parties and numerous local, non-partisan lists are vying for voters, which contributes to their confusion and the fragmentation of political representation.

Before the election is after the election

As a result, Jordan will be no different the day after the election than the day before. On the one hand,

this may be reassuring, not least for the country's international partners, as Jordan is of increasing geopolitical importance to the West as an ally valued for its stability. On the other hand, it leads to a dilemma: how can citizens be motivated to vote if the country's political orientation will not be fundamentally influenced by the ballot box? The real yard stick for the success of the upcoming election, not at least for the Jordanian decision-makers themselves, is thus the voter turnout. In 2020, amidst the covid pandemic, it had reached, with around 30 percent, a historical low.

One unknown factor is how the escalation of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the 7th of October will affect the voting behaviour of Jordanians. The Gaza war did indeed lead to a new wave of politicization, especially among the younger generation. Many took part in political actions for the first time, from writing protest letters to attending demonstrations or organising boycott campaigns. However, this must not necessarily translate into participation in an institutionalized process such as elections, whose outcome might not lead to any policy change on that topic anyhow. In addition, solidarity with Palestinians, while in different degrees and shades, has been clearly articulated in all political camps.

The Islamists above all are nevertheless trying to make political capital out of this. Particularly in the current election campaign, they are relying on nostalgic and pan-Islamic rhetoric – and on supporting what they define as "Palestinian resistance". One of the campaign logos of the Islamic Action Front is an inverted triangle in the colours green and white, usually associated with Islam, and making an obvious allusion to the red " Hamas triangle " that has become familiar since the Gaza war. Some observers conclude from the student elections last May that this strategy could well work. At the largest and most important university in the country, the Amman-based University of Jordan, the list close to the Muslim Brotherhood achieved a surprisingly good result of 45 percent. But in other parts of the country, national-conservative lists and lists put forward by traditional tribal structures prevailed. Liberal and progressive forces fear being caught up in the vortex of criticism of the West and the double standards it is accused of, which has become very loud in Jordan in

the wake of the Gaza war. But especially in the final phase of the election campaign, domestic and socio-economic issues in particular, such as the fight against unemployment and the strengthening of the welfare state, have once again come to the fore.

The upcoming parliamentary elections are certainly not a democratic breakthrough. But it would be unfair to dismiss them as a dry run for party politics or even a mere fig leaf. This time, more than ever, there are authentic debates about ideologies and ideas and authentic candidates who want to get involved in political representation

and the decision-making process. At a time when democracy is in retreat in many places, Jordan is trying to take a step towards a more inclusive political system. If this leads to more political participation and ultimately a government that is more accountable to the citizens, the kingdom can send a hopeful signal that reaches far beyond its borders.

- ¹ International Republican Institute: "State of the State – Nationwide Survey of Jordan, Wave 4", February 2024, available online: <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Jordan-IRI-February-2024-poll-full-presentation.pdf> [02.09.2024]; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung/NAMA: "The State of Political Participation and Representation in Jordan", December 2022, available online: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/jordanien/single-title/-/content/survey-the-state-of-political-participation-and-representation-in-jordan-2022> [02.09.2024].
- ² Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2024 (and previous years), available online: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/jordan/freedom-world/2024> [02.09.2024].
- ³ Human Rights Watch: Jordan – Scrap Draconian Cybercrimes Bill. Proposed Law Threatens Rights to Expression, Anonymity, Access to Information, July 24, 2024, available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/jordan-scrap-draconian-cybercrimes-bill> [02.09.2024].
- ⁴ The New Arab: Jordanian government makes arrests amid growing protests for Gaza, April 2, 2024, available online: <https://www.newarab.com/news/jordan-makes-arrests-amid-growing-gaza-protests> [02.09.2024].

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