Introduction

The parliamentary elections in Jordan are to be held on September 20th 2016. A new election law has been passed for the upcoming elections, whereas the system is moving from a ‘one-man one-vote system’, which was introduced in 1993, towards voting for lists of multiple candidates. Article 9 in the draft law states that “Candidacies for parliamentary seats assigned to electoral districts will be filled through proportional, open lists” and continues “The voter is to cast a vote for one of the lists first, and then vote for a number of candidates on that list.”1 This means that all candidates running will need to be a part of a list and that all blocs or parties must provide lists for each constituency throughout the country. The voter will need to vote for a list of multiple candidates in their respective district, and for individual candidates within the same ticket.2

This new law is an attempt to strengthen the position of political parties which have held a relatively low percentage of the parliamentary seats, and furthermore, prevent the behavior of voting according to tribal affiliations. Jordan has throughout the county’s entire history had strong traditions of voting according to tribal and family lines. Several individual political analysts have praised the change and claim that the new election law will enhance the power of political parties and thus the democratic principles in the Kingdom. The initial response to the new election law was mainly positive among Jordanian politicians and the civil society, but there has also been confusion with the new election law, in addition to criticism claiming it is not promoting democracy. In general, the trust in the political institutions are low among the Jordanian population and thus the voter turnout has formerly been less than 40%.

Quotas and the role of political parties

The Parliament of Jordan consists of two chambers. First, the Upper Senate (Majlis Al-'Aayan) where the 75 members are appointed directly by the King. Secondly, the lower Chamber of Deputies (Majlis Al-Nuwab) has 130 members, elected through proportional representation in 23 constituencies throughout Jordan. The election cycle is normally 4 years.

The Chamber of Deputies has several minimum quotas for women and minority groups. 15 seats are reserved for women (19 women were elected in the 2013 elections), 9

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seats are reserved for Christians; and finally 3 seats are reserved for Circassians. Quotas exists to ensure diversity and representation of different minority groups as well as women in the political system. However, the quotas are always subject to discussion as some consider them to take the place of someone who might be more qualified for the job. On the other hand, women activists were hoping for a higher quota for women.  

Political parties have been allowed in the Parliamentary elections in Jordan since 1993 and around 30 different political parties exists within the Kingdom. However, the political parties formerly contested fewer than a 5\textsuperscript{th} of the seats. The remaining seats belong to individual politicians. This is a result of the ‘one-man one-vote system’ which is now disregarded in hopes to empower political parties and weaken voting according to tribal associations. In the previous Parliamentary elections of 2013, individual candidates won 123 seats, while the remaining 27 seats were divided between 22 political parties (the Parliament consisted of 150 seats in 2013).

None of the political parties have substantial support in the rural areas of Jordan. Overall, most Jordanians do not have a strong connection to any political party, and even with the move towards voting for multiple candidate lists, these are regional lists and not for the country at large. Hence, they are not likely to become building blocks for national political parties. The main opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic Action Front have announced their intention to compete in the 2016 election, implying the end of their election boycott (they boycotted the 2010 and 2013 elections). The 2013 election caused a split of the Muslim Brotherhood due to disagreement on boycotting the elections or not. This resulted in an alternative Islamist Movement called the Islamic Centrist, which this year has to run against the larger Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has operated legally in Jordan for decades and has strong grassroots support particularly in the urban areas among the Palestinians-Jordanians who do not favour the Jordanian-Jordanian tribesmen. However, the Jordanian authorities have closed many of their offices and challenged their licence to operate.


Low voter turnout

Everyone above the age of 18 holding a national identity card can register for voting in the parliamentary elections in Jordan. Numbers from the 2013 elections reveals that less than 40% of the eligible voters registered and voted that year. The number of eligible voters in 2016 is 4,139,730. A recent publication in the Jordan Times indicates that 38% are planning to vote in the 2016 elections according to an opinion poll conducted by the University of Jordan Centre for Strategic Studies (CSS). The poll further shows that the lowest interest in the elections was found in Zarqa, while the highest voter turnout is expected in Mafraq and that the older generation is more interested in voting than the younger population. Among the population aged 18-34 only 31% have expressed their intentions to vote. While voter turnout has been low, there were however some important improvements in terms of women’s representation within government in the 2013 elections.

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Public scepticism

In general, there is a substantial lack of trust in politicians and the political and democratic institutions in Jordan. According to an April 2016 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, as many as 87% of Jordanians said their parliament had not made even one praiseworthy accomplishment during the 2013-16 term. 10 Such public scepticism towards the parliament and the political system as a whole explains why very few Jordanians are interested in the elections. Most people feel like their vote will not contribute to any substantial change. Freedom House reports that:” Corruption has become a catalytic issue since 2009, and is among the most commonly articulated grievances by various opposition forces and protest groups.” 11 Furthermore, Freedom House claims that every election between 1993 and 2010 have had systematic flaws. They highlight three main issues; first, the country’s districts are malapportioned to give greater weight to the voters in rural districts. Secondly, Freedom House has been critical of the ‘one-man one-vote’ system as it favours conservative independents like tribal leaders; and finally, Freedom House criticises the practices of vote buying, ballot stuffing and illegal busing of voters to the polling stations. Furthermore, they point out how the election arrangements marginalise Palestinian representation, which fell just over 10% of the Lower House after the 2010 elections. In 2012, Freedom House gave Jordan a score of 2,19 on ‘accountability and public voice’, on a scale from 0-7, where 0 is the worst and 7 is the best possible score. The ‘anti-corruption and transparency’ score was 2,75, on the same scale. All of these factors contributes to the distrust in the political institutions among Jordanians.

Promises of a flawless elections and international observation

The Chief Commissioner of the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) Khaled Kalaldeh has made efforts to assure to the population that this years’ election will be free and fair by the help of local and international observers to oversee the election processes. 12 There will also be facilitation for the disabled, as special centres for the deaf and the blind will set up across the country. In an interview with the Jordan Times he says:

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11 Freedom House rapport available at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/countries-crossroads/2012/jordan
"Our message to Jordanians is as follows: We will guarantee there won't be a single dark spot in the upcoming elections (...) Hopefully, this time no one would claim irregularities in the election process."

The 2013 Parliamentary Elections were the first elections to be overseen by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) following its establishment in 2012. Kalaldeh says that between 7,000 to 10,000 local observers are expected to monitor the elections. In a press release from Brussels on the 5th of August, the EU announced that they will deploy an Election Observation Mission (EOM) to Jordan to observe the elections. This will be the second time that the EU will observe the elections in Jordan. Furthermore, representatives of around 150 election monitors from around the world will be present to supervise the voting procedure.

The future of young Jordanians

Half of Jordan’s 4 million voter population belong to the younger generation and 300,000 are university students making up around 15% of the eligible voters. However, the voter turnout among students is only around 5%. The Jordanian Government and the IEC have launched an initiative to encourage students to exercise their right to vote. The initiative gathers students and activists from different political parties. This is a chance for students and youth to be able to affect their future job opportunities, which is a big concern among young Jordanians as unemployment rates are very high.

“We all agree that reform starts with participating in the elections and that boycotting the upcoming polls will not do any good… Change does not happen overnight,” said coordinator of the initiative, Sameer Mashhour. The clear message to the students is that the elections hold the key to their future and that it can also help providing them jobs. Further he points out that the previous parliaments decisions have not represented the society as a whole, and that this is one of the main reasons why young people are reluctant to vote.

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16 Goussouss, S. (2016) “New initiative targets universities to encourage students to vote”.
Al Hayat Centre for Civil Society Development is also working to raise students’ political awareness ahead of the upcoming elections. The centre’s program coordinator points out two reasons why young citizens are reluctant to vote; first the history of previous elections where many of them had systematic flaws of corruption and secondly, lack of information on how and who to vote for.

**Opposing views on the electoral law change**

His Royal Highness King Abdullah II, wrote in the Royal letter that the new election law, turning away from the one-man one-vote system is a “milestone in our national reform process”. He goes on:

"We hope that this law encourages candidates to join platform-based political blocs, removed from sub-loyalties and narrow interests, in a way that contributes to the formation of stronger parliamentary bloc structures, with specific platforms and goals in order to work under the Dome in a more mature fashion."

Despite the positivity by His Royal Highness, the perceptions among the population has been varying. There seems to be some confusion and lack of information on what the changes will mean in practice and doubts if it will contribute as a significant change. Tribes are suspected establishing their own lists and have their tribe members vote for their respective list. The new law is a part of a reform process that is still going to take time, and there is no reason to think that tribal loyalties will not be decisive in this year’s elections. Electing candidates based on their programs and vision will still take time to mature in Jordan, particularly in the rural areas.

Fahen Khitan wrote an article in Al Ghad where he made it clear that most candidates running for the upcoming elections are now facing difficulties creating electoral lists, and

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17 Goussous, S. (2016) “Seminar aim to increase students’ political awareness ahead of polls”


blame the new law for these challenges. He says that the problem is not the election law, but rather the reality of political parties in Jordan and the small-circuit system.

Summary
The parliamentary elections in Jordan will be held on September 20th. 130 members of the Chamber of Deputies are to be elected, of whom 15 seats are reserved for women. A new law has been passed for this election, moving the system away from the one-man one-vote system, towards voting for lists of multiple candidates. All parties or blocs will have to create multiple-candidate lists for the different circuits, and voters will vote for a list in their respectively district.

This new law is attempting to prevent the voting according to tribal loyalties, which is a strong tradition in the Jordanian political system and mentality. His Majesty King Abdullah II claims it’s a “milestone in our national reform process”. It is also attempting to empower the role of political parties in Jordan.

Voter turnout among young people is low in Jordan. Some of the reasons for people being reluctant to vote is a history of corrupt politicians and election systems and parliaments decisions not representing the society as a whole, as well as lack of information about how and who to vote for. The IEC has promised that this year’s elections will be flaw-less and several observers, locally and internationally, have accepted the invitation to observe the elections.

Bibliography


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Independent Election Comission: http://www.entikhabat.jo


