

## Post-election Analysis

### JORDAN

## Two very different elections took place in Jordan on Wednesday

**Daniel Marx**

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One set were touted as a major step on the country's process to reform, an exercise in citizenship, a day of national pride, by a regime and its supporters anxious to get out the message that under King Abdullah democratisation is really underway. The multiple media outlets, public, private, as well as social, were awash with messages of voter pride, national feeling and praise of the perfect organisation of the polls. As polling came to a close in Amman, loyalists gathered throughout the city to celebrate their victory. Not at party headquarters like elsewhere in the world where the faithful gather to cheer their party's results, but instead at community buildings, hotels, bars and private residences. The point was all too clear: parties did not matter, the actual results of the election were also of secondary importance (although presumably not for the candidates themselves); instead what counted was that the elections had gone off smoothly, a new parliament was elected and Jordan's democratisation had been displayed.

The other elections were a much less jubilant affair. Decades of stagnant politics having dulled expectations, a certain level of public disinterest was in evidence at polling stations around the capital - this in spite of the national holiday that had been granted to encourage voter turnout. Between one and two million potential voters hadn't even enrolled, so do not count in the official turnout rate of 56.5 percent (the government is naturally reluctant to reveal exactly how many citizens are concerned). Governmental refusal to substantially alter an electoral system responsible for years of unfair elections saw much of the country's opposition, including its sole solid political party, the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF), sit the elections out. The Herak and other youth groups who, over the last two years have led protests across the country, also boycotted the election. For these groups, as for many urban Jordanians, these elections were a sideshow, and far from a reason to celebrate.

Both elections were of course, one and the same. Jordanians were voting for the 150 members of their House of Representatives, the lower house of their bicameral parliament which King Abdullah dissolved last October, not even two years into its four year term. Although Jordan's regime has survived better than others the tumult of the Arab Spring, popular discontent with politics, political corruption and politicians themselves has long been bubbling close to the surface, venting itself in occasional popular demonstrations albeit much smaller ones than elsewhere in the region. Indeed, the dissolution of parliament and the calling of fresh elections - with assurances that these would be different from the elections of the past - were all part of the regime's strategy to defuse public pressure and ride out the Arab Spring. As such, both of the above interpretations of these elections are accurate, as contradictory as that may seem.

A carefully mounted PR campaign orchestrated by the regime promoted these elections as the culmination of a two-year-long reform process initiated by King Abdullah in early 2011 as the first ripples of the Arab Spring blew in. In March 2011 the king appointed a National Dialogue Committee (NDC) to propose changes to the country's election and parties laws and a Royal Committee to do the same to the constitution. The Jordanian Parliament subsequently approved several constitutional amendments and passed a new election and new political party laws, before King Abdullah dismissed it and called early elections. These were to be managed for the first time not by the country's powerful Interior Ministry, but by a newly created Independent Election Committee (IEC) headed by a respected former minister. A host of administrative measures taken by the committee, such as the creation of a new electoral roll, the creation of standardised illustrated ballots, legal provisions for electoral observers and improvements to the electoral complaints procedure all

contributed positively to the regime's message that these elections would indeed be different.

Yet this auspicious narrative has several significant omissions. Despite being set up to guide the reform process, the National Dialogue Committee (NDC) and its recommendations (presented officially in June 2011), were largely ignored by the government. Jordan's electoral law has long been blamed for producing blatantly unfair election results and its reform has been a key demand of pro-democracy groups and opposition parties, not the least of which is the IAF which has boycotted several elections for this reason. The NDC recommended major changes to the electoral law, especially abandoning the much-maligned single non-transferable vote system (SNTV), known in Jordan as "one-vote" (*sawt al-wahid*), in favour of a proportional representation system with open lists at both national and provincial level. But its proposal was disregarded outright. Instead the government opted to maintain "one-vote" for the vast majority of seats (123/150) but add, as a sop to the opposition parties, a second proportional vote for the remaining 27 seats. This made the system used in Wednesday's election a perplexingly complex one with two majority systems (first-past-the-post in single-member districts, single non-transferable vote in multi-member districts), reserved seats for two minority groups, a quota for women and in addition one national district with 27 seats to allocate proportionally to closed party lists. Significantly, the new Election Law made no attempt to remedy the severe malapportionment that has characterised all past elections and which produces severe voter inequality in favour of 'tribal Transjordanians' at the expense of the majority of the population: urban dwellers, mostly of Palestinian origin. Without meaningful improvements to the electoral system or more powers accorded to an until now irrelevant parliament, pro-reform groups, the IAF and several other parties (although not all the opposition) decided to actively boycott the elections.

Wednesday's elections then were something of a trial of strength for both regime and opposition. Participation was the first big test, and the IEC extended voting by one hour to maximise numbers. In the end, the final tally was a respectable 56.5% turnout, although the capital Amman remained a conspicuously low 43% (turnout in rural areas seems generally to have surpassed 60% while in urban areas was closer to 40%). The IAF accused the government of inflating the figures, saying that real national turnout was only 17% but its accusation was seriously undermined by two independent Jordanian monitoring groups who gave figures very similar to the official numbers. A much more credible line for the IAF would have been to point out that with only 1.3 million voters out of just 2.3 million registered voters in a population of more than 6 million, real voter turnout was certainly much lower than 50%. Significant numbers of Jordanians simply did not bother to register. The other major test was the credibility of the voting process itself. In this sense, the IEC deserves credit. The vast majority of polling stations were efficiently managed with highly professional staff and supported by a heavy police presence outside. The number of violations reported around the country (especially of vote-buying) was still too high to be acceptable but insufficient to affect the credibility of the election. This was vouched for, furthermore, by teams of observers both domestic and international (including the EU, NDI & IRI).

At the time this report was filed, the final results of the election were still unavailable. Preliminary results reported by the Jordanian press indicate however, that some 37 of the 150 seats were won by Islamists and other critics of the regime, which if so is an advance on previous parliaments in terms of representativeness. Yet the number of MPs belonging to a political party would, at no more than ten, seem to be

truly minimal - which hardly bodes well for the development of a solid party culture in parliament. Preliminary results indicate above all however, just as the opposition had predicted (and with reason given the nature of the electoral system), that Jordan's parliament will once again be thoroughly dominated by loyalists whose affiliation is tribal rather than national or partisan. Just how a parliament of individuals representing local and not national interests will be able to come together and form a coherent and functional whole remains to be seen. There is certainly little doubt that at least in the short-term, Jordan is not about to have a strong legislative branch of government.