

Jordan: Elections provide a fig leaf for unpopular regime

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The Jordanian parliamentary elections present any serious political commentator with something of a dilemma. It is after all customary when writing about the outcome of an election to explain the nature of the parties seeking office, how the people voted, which party won, who will form the next government and the policies that the new government is likely to pursue.

But it is not really possible to do this when describing the Jordanian elections. The significance of the election held on June 17 in a country of some 5.5 million people lies in the fact that it was held at all, rather than the outcome. Its aim was to provide political cover for an absolutist regime at a time when the United States is calling for the “democratisation” of the region.

The tiny desert kingdom of Jordan was carved out of the former Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I and given by the British as a reward for services rendered to a local potentate, whose heir still rules today.

The present king, Abdullah II, rules as an absolute monarch, dependent upon his Bedouin army drawn from his own tribe. He is a former military man who was a commander of Jordan’s special forces specialising in counter-terrorism. Parliament is entirely symbolic. It provides no fetters whatsoever on the king’s powers. Only the lower house is elected. The king can dissolve parliament whenever he pleases and veto legislation that is not to his liking. His secret police, the Muharabat, pervade every aspect of Jordanian life.

Jordan, with few natural resources, is extremely poor and serves as little more than a displaced persons camp for several million former West Bank Palestinians who had been driven out by or fled from the Israelis in 1948 and 1967.

The election was the first to be held for six years. It took place almost two years after King Abdullah II dissolved parliament at the end of its four-year term in July 2001. He repeatedly postponed elections, citing “regional circumstances” as the reason. He feared that the rising popular unrest fuelled by anger at the brutal suppression by the Israelis of the Palestinians would undermine the economic agenda dictated to him by the US and the international financial institutions and sweep away his autocratic regime.

His plans to liberalise the economy, normalise relations with Israel, secure Western aid and loans to shore up the bankrupt economy, and support the US war against Iraq, were bitterly opposed. As workers took to the streets in support of the Palestinians, Abdullah outlawed public demonstrations and banned public meetings to prevent opposition organisations, such as the

Islamist parties from gaining support.

Since 2001, his majesty has ruled by decree, issuing more than 160 “temporary laws” pending parliament’s approval. Despite unanimous public opposition to the war against Iraq, the presence of US troops along the border with Iraq and Patriot antimissiles near Amman meant that Abdullah could not deny that he was cooperating with the US.

Anticipating unrest, the government cracked down on oppositionists and rounded up suspected militants prior to the outbreak of the war. In November 2002, ostensibly under the guise of arresting a “gang of outlaws” who were terrorising the southern city of Ma’an, one of the king’s key areas of support, security services conducted an operation using unprecedented force and attracting international attention.

While in most countries parliamentary elections are at best the opportunity to kick out one bunch of scoundrels to replace them with another, in Jordan they do not have even that minimal value.

The king is not obliged to appoint the prime minister or even form the government from either the majority party or the parliament, preferring to rely instead on his own loyal supporters and wealthy Palestinian businessmen. In an interview with *Financial Times* journalist Roula Khalaf, Abdullah made it quite clear that he had no intention of breaking with tradition and choosing a government based upon the outcome of the election. He said that ministers would be picked according to qualifications rather than political affiliation. He justified this with the remark that in the past ministers who came from parliament spent their time “ingratiating themselves with their representatives so that they can get elected next time round”.

He described the elections as a “transitional phase that should lead to the creation of strong political blocs, rather than set new policies for the country.”

The king required that all candidates be “independents” rather than party members. He increased the number of seats from 80 to 110, lowered the voting age to 18 and reserved six seats for women in order to appear to be “building democracy”. Of the 760 candidates competing for the 110 seats, almost all were loyal supporters of the monarch.

Despite the king declaring the day of the election a public holiday, voter turnout among the two million electorate was just 56 percent. It was low in Amman and Zarqa, the largest cities, but higher in other parts of the country. This was no accident. Gerrymandering was rife with the elections blatantly rigged in

favour of the small towns, villages and tribal areas where the clans and East Bankers (original Jordanians) lived. The cities, where the overwhelming majority of the population resides and which are of predominantly Palestinian descent, had far fewer candidates.

Loyalists won 93 seats, while the Islamist candidates affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood's political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), which reversed its earlier position of not participating in national elections, took 15 of the 30 seats they contested. The Islamists' success is widely believed to be a gross underestimate of their actual support in the country.

Even this carefully controlled election, which the authorities claimed were the cleanest in Jordan's history, did not escape claims of vote tampering. Such allegations were strengthened by the king's ban on election monitors and the exclusion of journalists from the voting stations.

Apart from the Islamists and a couple of independents assumed to be of a similar political persuasion, all the candidates broadly support Abdullah's agenda. The BBC's correspondent in Amman, Heba Saleh, wrote, "This parliament should not give the king any headaches" and then went on to add cynically, "the election of 15 Islamists will ensure a degree of debate and perhaps some limited pressure on the government".

Since September 2002, the king and his crony government have promoted a Jordan First campaign in an attempt to get Jordanians to focus on domestic issues such as education, economic development, equal opportunities and participation in national elections rather than regional issues such as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the US war on Iraq.

Planning Minister Bassem Awadallah explained that the new national motto, Jordan First, was meant to encourage candidates and voters to concentrate on "practical platforms for domestic change in the national interest".

In 2002, the US gave \$250 million in economic aid to fund an economic programme aimed at boosting education and in January 2003 tossed in a further \$145 million for Abdullah's support for the US war against Iraq.

The restructuring of the international economy in the 1980s and the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987 led to a huge economic crisis in 1989. Abdullah's father, King Hussein, found it increasingly difficult to reward his traditional Transjordanian supporters with public jobs and subsidies and protect his business allies behind state regulation and government contracts.

Without loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Hussein would have been forced to lay off thousands of workers, cut back on social expenditure and eliminate subsidies on key commodities—destabilising the social relations and patronage upon which his authoritarian regime depended. The price of the bailout was the implementation of its economic liberalisation agenda.

Hussein, ever the master of the political tightrope act, lifted the ban on political parties imposed in 1957 and turned to national elections as a means of appeasing dissatisfied Jordanians and providing a few crumbs for the tribes, clans and businesses to compete for cabinet posts and seats in parliament. He thereby hoped to increase the scope for patronage, or *wasta* as it is known, and deflect criticism onto parliament while at the same time retaining the power to reward loyalists with cabinet posts. His

hopes were dashed when palace supporters won only 22 seats, while the Islamists won 34, leftists 13 and independents 11 of the 80 parliamentary seats in the 1989 elections, giving the opposition parties a 59 percent majority.

The economic situation in Jordan deteriorated drastically following Hussein's backing for Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War. Always dependent upon economic aid from and the remittances of its citizens employed in the Gulf States, these sources dried up as Jordan paid the penalty for opposing the US. It was this lesson that led Hussein to support the US sponsored peace process in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reach an agreement with Israel in 1994.

Immediately after the disastrous 1989 elections, he set about fixing the electoral laws so that it was difficult for the Palestinians, left wing and religious groups to win seats in national elections. The 1993 and 1997 elections strengthened the palace's traditional base among tribal and rural East Bankers and marginalised the impoverished workers in the towns and cities, above all the former Palestinian refugees living in abject poverty and squalor. The overwhelming majority of Palestinians abstained and the election served only to increase the social divisions and tensions within the country.

While privatisation under the aegis of the IMF went ahead in ways that benefited international capital, Hussein sought to mollify his traditional supporters who had in the main administered the public sector by offering them a stake in the new enterprises as "strategic investors". He set the terms and conditions to ensure that only the palace's clients could bid and prevent the wealthy Palestinian businessmen, who dominated the private sector, from gaining control.

The IMF austerity measures have brought untold misery to the Jordanian people: increased taxes, removal of subsidies, and loss of jobs. Unemployment is 27 percent and many more live below the poverty line. Prices have soared as the currency has declined in value. Jordan's debt at \$8 billion is higher than its GDP.

Hussein's son, Abdullah, who succeeded him in 1999, has continued these policies. Last week's elections will mean no change in either his political or economic direction. Totally dependent upon the Bush administration, he supported the US rape of Iraq, signed a free trade agreement with the US and is currently hosting the summit of World Economic Forum leaders called to reorganise the Middle East in big business's interests.



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