

# Jordan on the brink of disaster

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Last week's elections in Jordan resulted in a large majority for tribal leaders, pro-monarchy loyalists and businessmen.

Far from ushering in a period of reform as King Abdullah claimed, the elections were designed to maintain the ruling elite's grip on power. They will precipitate deepening social and political discontent in a country that has long served as a linchpin of US foreign policy in the region.

About 36 of the 150 seats went to opposition figures associated with pan-Arab nationalist groups and independent Islamists. Three seats went to candidates charged with buying votes days before the elections.

The country's main opposition party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political wing of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, had called for a boycott of the elections.

Under the new rules, only 27 seats in the newly expanded parliament of 150 members would be open to a national list of political parties, ensuring that the old hands would retain control. The seats were gerrymandered to ensure that the tribal areas loyal to the king had more seats than urban areas where Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin live and whose concerns the Muslim Brotherhood, though led by a wealthy East Banker elite, has made play of championing. The monarchy has long fostered the divisions between the traditional East Bankers, who control the military, intelligence apparatus and the state bureaucracy, and those who came to Jordan after 1948 and 1967, as a means of shoring up its own, very weak position.

The elections, which Abdullah called ahead of schedule, are the first since the eruption of the mass protests that brought down Washington's other allies, Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak, two years ago and swept throughout the region. Faced with rising tensions, calls for reform, ongoing protests that have

mounted as fuel and other basic commodity prices have risen, and some calls for him to go, Abdullah touted the elections as the centrepiece of a reform process, including reining in rampant corruption. He made noises about devolving some powers to parliament, including the right to choose the prime minister and cabinet, while retaining the power to dissolve and reconvene it, declare a state of emergency and rule by decree.

In the event, 56.6 percent of the registered 2.3 million voters, who form only 70 percent of all eligible voters, turned out for elections to a parliament seen as corrupt, inept and a rubber stamp for the king's decrees. The IAF claimed that turnout was just 17 percent. They and other observers said that there were instances of vote-buying, repeat voting and other electoral infringements.

After the preliminary results were announced, thousands took to the street in Amman, Irbid and Kerak on Friday in protest. Police used tear gas to disperse the crowds, injuring four. Nevertheless, David Martin, the head of the European Union's observer mission, gave the elections a clean bill of health, praising them as "transparent and credible". He did so while acknowledging that "substantial deficiencies in the election law affect, however, universality of voter participation and equality of votes."

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos on Friday, Abdullah said that he would pursue democratic reforms after the "landmark" vote, an announcement belied by his intention to "consult" with parliament over *his* choice of premier who would in turn "consult" with parliament over *his* new cabinet.

He would reach out to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that boycotted the election. The IAF has called on Abdullah to form a "national salvation government" of Islamists and other opposition figures.

While the Jordanian regime has long opposed the IAF, which has a base in the Jordanians of Palestinian

origin that form the majority within the country, the rise to power of its sister movements in Egypt and Tunisia and the prominent role they have played in Libya and Syria have given it a higher profile.

Abdullah may seek some accommodation with the IAF, which could provide him with a means of containing simmering discontent that has yet to find coherent political expression.

However, the US proxy war to topple the Assad regime in Syria, financed and armed by Washington's Sunni allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, and trained and supported with military intelligence by Jordan and Israel, is fraught with dangers for Abdullah. Assad's overthrow at the hands of the rival Islamist gangs now fighting in Syria could result in the fragmentation of the country, with consequences that would spill over into Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. As Abdullah himself acknowledged last week at Davos, this would be "catastrophic and something that we would be reeling from for decades to come."

He warned of the threat of foreign jihadist fighters now in Syria. Last October, his security forces foiled a plot by 11 Jordanians with links to Al Qaeda in Iraq, who had acquired their weapons in Syria, to blow up several sites in Jordan, including Abdoun, Amman's wealthiest neighbourhood and home to the heavily fortified US embassy. This came just days after Jordanian border guards arrested two cousins of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the Jordanian militant who led Al Qaeda's Iraqi wing and claimed responsibility for the 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, as they entered the country from Syria. Jordan's 1994 treaty with Israel and its longstanding cooperation with the US military have made it a target for Islamist militants.

Abdullah said that Al Qaeda had been working in Syria for the past year and was getting support "from certain quarters." He added, "They are a force to contend with, so even if we got the best government into Damascus tomorrow, we have at least two or three years of securing our borders from them coming across and to clean them up".

He compared the militant threat in Syria with Afghanistan, saying that "the new Taliban that we are going to have to deal with will be in Syria." This is nothing less than an admission that the Washington-backed insurgency is made up of armed Islamist militants who were now out of control and posed a

threat to his own regime.

Around 350,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Jordan from the fighting, with 36,000 coming since the beginning of the year, adding to the already grievous social pressures in Jordan. Their living conditions, in one of the harshest winters on record, are appalling. According to the International Rescue Committee, the majority of the refugees are living outside the refugee camps—in cities and towns where social services, schools and even trash and waste systems are not equipped to meet the needs of a suddenly inflated population. Desperate, they have come despite the government's strict rules on who can enter the country and controls on their movements outside the refugee camps in an effort to prevent the fighting spreading to Jordan.

Abdullah appealed for greater international help for the refugees, urging the stockpiling of humanitarian supplies that could be taken across Syria's borders, to try to keep people from leaving. Such humanitarian aid would be distributed by the armed gangs as a means of "winning hearts and minds". He said, "If these people start to starve and they don't have fuel and electricity and water, and hospitals are not running, that's when radicalisation comes in and takes advantage".

He called for the major powers to come together "decisively" to end the bloodshed and come up with a solution to the crisis in Syria, a thinly veiled demand for direct imperialist intervention.



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