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Jordan's 2020 Parliamentary Election: Settling for the Status Quo

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This report explains what the 2020 parliamentary election results mean for Jordan at a time when the country is facing immense challenges aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Voter Turnout

Jordan's government portrayed the 2020 parliamentary elections as a key milestone in its pursuit of democracy and declared that Jordanians were practicing their constitutional rights during extraordinary times. Despite the pandemic, the public safety measures adopted by the Independent Election Commission helped guarantee orderly voting. The elections saw more political parties and women contesting for the 130-seats of the lower house. Moreover, youth participation was generally higher than the previous polls, perhaps reflecting a desire of the young generation to engage in public policy.

However, only 29.9 percent of the 4.64 million eligible voters cast their ballot, down from 36 percent in 2016. It was the lowest turnout in more than a decade and an indication of voter apathy and mistrust in the political process. Concerns about the coronavirus transmission contributed to the low voter turnout, but many experts agree it was not the only reason. Polls reveal low confidence in government institutions, and many view parliament as being ineffective and lacking real legislative powers. In fact, several polls that were conducted prior to the coronavirus spread indicated that voter turnout would be low. On November 2, 2020, eight days before the elections, a poll published by Hayat for Civil Society Development (RASED) revealed that only 33.7 percent of Jordanians intended to participate in the elections,¹ with 57 percent of those surveyed saying they do not believe the next parliament would be effective.

The November 10 parliamentary elections were also held under severe restrictions on election campaigning and in an atmosphere of resentment over the government's handling of the pandemic and economic frustrations exacerbated by perceptions of widespread corruption. People became more preoccupied with meeting their basic needs rather than voting as a full curfew and lockdown forced businesses to close and many Jordanians lost their jobs and livelihoods. The unemployment rate rose to 23.9 percent in the third quarter of 2020, up from 19.3 percent in the first quarter, according to the Department of Statistics.² Moreover, the sharp deterioration in government finances, together with sluggish economic growth increased public debt to 105.3 percent of the forecasted GDP by the end of May 2020.³

There is also growing disenchantment with the curbs on public freedoms. The use of emergency laws that were enforced to battle the coronavirus continue to be seen as stifling criticism.⁴ Moreover, the crackdown on the

¹ 33.7% of Jordanians Intend to Participate in the Elections, November 2, 2020.

<https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-337-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%88%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA>

² 23.9% Unemployment Rate during the third Quarter of 2020, December 2, 2020.

<http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/category/unemployment-rate/>

³ The World Bank in Jordan, Last Updated October 1, 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview>

⁴ Covid-19 Response: New Penalties for 'Causing Panic' About Pandemic, May 5, 2020.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/jordan-free-speech-threats-under-covid-19-response>

Teachers Association⁵ a few months before the elections and the arrests of protesters and political and anticorruption activists in 2019⁶ signaled that space for activism and public freedom continues to shrink further. "Jordan tried to project a democratic image and parliamentary elections gave legitimacy to the government. The government wants to boost its standing in front of donors and the international community. That's why there was insistence on holding the elections amid the pandemic," said Amer Sabaileh, a political analyst. "The government wants to show that it made a significant achievement during a difficult time, but in reality, there is no political will to change."⁷

The Minister of Political and Parliamentary Affairs Musa Maaytah explained that the constitutional amendments which took place in 2011 stipulate that elections must be held within a period of four months after the legislature was dissolved.⁸ Despite the amendments, questions were still raised on why the government insisted on conducting the race at a time the country saw a record rise in daily cases,⁹ while it postponed the elections of several professional associations including the national sports federations that were scheduled for the summer when the coronavirus cases were much less.

One positive outcome over the years has been the establishment of the Independent Elections Committee, which oversees the election process. Even though 69 percent of Jordanians have confidence in the Independent Election Commission,¹⁰ the latest elections were seen as one of the least democratic in Jordan's recent history, according to a report published in the Washington Post. The report said that not only did the pandemic endanger voters' safety, it also undercut the election's integrity. Candidates were uncertain about whether elections would be held and thus whether they should launch their campaigns. And it created new opportunities for corruption and electoral manipulation.¹¹ A press release by the Centre for Human Rights was issued on February 1, 2020, declaring that it had documented violations including tribal meetings that defied the defense law rules that make it illegal for more than 20 people to gather in one place. The press release also stated that some candidates were pressured to withdraw from lists or the electoral process altogether.¹² "Jordanians do not trust the government and parliament. They also do not believe parliament will make any significant changes," said Oraib Al-Rantawi, the founder and director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies. "Citizens also questioned the integrity and the purpose of elections at this time."¹³

Irrelevance of Political Parties?

During this election, the biggest number of political parties campaigned for the first time since 1992. In fact, 41 out of 48 political parties ran for elections, with 389 candidates or 23.2 percent of the total number of candidates, but only 12 party members won including six non-members who are still affiliated with a political party. The most powerful political bloc -- an Islamic-led coalition called the National Alliance for Reform -- lost five seats compared to the previous election. The leftists and Nationalist groups did not secure any seats. It is important to note that 99 deputies out of 130 are new to the legislative scene but the elections will unlikely bring significant changes or move the country towards democracy.¹⁴

Most of the elected parliamentarians are businessmen and deputies affiliated with tribes including 20 retired senior military officers. "The new parliament is individualistic, apolitical and service-oriented," said a former

⁵ Jordan: Arrests, Forced Dispersal at Teachers Protests, August 27, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/27/jordan-arrests-forced-dispersal-teacher-protests>

⁶ Jordan: New Arrests of Activists, Human Rights Watch, November 28, 2019, Jordan: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/28/jordan-new-arrests-activists>

⁷ Interview with Amer Sabaileh, a political analyst, December 1, 2020

⁸ Al-Maaytah: Parliament Cannot be Absent over Four Months, September 10, 2020. shorturl.at/dwHW9

⁹ Jordan's Stubborn Insistence on "Business As Usual", November 13, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83232>

¹⁰ 33.7% of Jordanians Intend to Participate in the Elections, <http://www.hayatcenter.org/uploads/2020/11/20201103201933en.pdf>

¹¹ The Pandemic Compromised Jordan's Parliamentary Elections, November 20, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/20/pandemic-compromised-jordans-parliamentary-elections/>

¹² الوطني لحقوق الإنسان: جسامة بعض الانتهاكات عابت العملية الانتخابية برمتها, Feb 1, 2020.

¹³ Interview with Oraib Al-Rantawi, founder and director general of Al Quds Center for Political Studies, December 6, 2020

¹⁴ Interview with Amer Bani Amer, director of Hayat for Civil Society Development (RASED), December 1, 2020

minister. "The voice of opposition is weak."¹⁵ Political parties remain weak and underrepresented. The election law continues to favor tribal candidates at the expense of those affiliated with political parties, while voting behavior is associated with tribal links. Amer Bani Amer, the founder and General Director of Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development RASED said: "Around 80 percent of the winning candidates are not affiliated with any political party and therefore, do not have any specific goal because they do not follow any specific ideology."¹⁶

Deputies were elected under the same election law of 2016, which is uncommon in Jordan where electoral laws are either changed or amended with every election. The 2016 law underwent significant changes and introduced the open list proportional representation, intended to increase the representation of political parties in parliament. But in practice, political parties remain marginalized, thanks to the open list system and a method of computing votes that is rather in favour of weaker lists (it is very difficult for a list to gain a second seat in an electoral district). Therefore, this system is not amenable to political parties or strong parliamentary lists that seek a wide representation in parliament, according to an assessment of parliamentary elections conducted by Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies in November 2020.¹⁷

Most political parties took part in the elections because the bylaws governing their funding provide financial incentives. For example, a political party that fields six candidates in three voting constituencies receives 20,000 Jordanian Dinars (or 28,000 US dollars).¹⁸ Another 15 percent would be added to that amount if women candidates are included or youth under the age of 35. A political party also receives additional financial support if it captures 1 percent of the electoral votes in the country.¹⁹

"The political parties' election results were disappointing," said Oraib Al- Rantawi. "I blame the political parties, but at the same time the political system does not want a strong parliament based on pluralism. There is no will or desire for that."²⁰ Critics say the political system in Jordan does not encourage a party system but at the same time political parties have not adapted or changed their discourse. They continue to fail in appealing to the electorate.

"The elections saw a significant participation of political parties more than the previous elections, but they did not achieve the victories they were hoping for. The election results underscored the poor organizational capacities of political parties, their fragmentation and the lack of meaningful national party politics and programs. The political parties did not play politics when they should have done so while the election law scatters the ballots. They did not invest in the ABCs of political party politics. They lack the ability to put in place a strategy and an election program. They failed to reach out to their bases."²¹

Political parties have also suffered due to a ban that had lasted more than three decades. In 1989, parliamentary elections resumed after a 22-year hiatus. In 1992, martial law was officially lifted and political parties were legalized. They participated in the 1993 general elections for the first time since 1956. Still, political parties continue to struggle for many reasons. Jordanians remain reluctant to form or join political parties over fears of being ostracized from the workplace or in routine bureaucratic procedures. Even students who obtain a Royal favor (in this case a scholarship) to public universities are not allowed to join parties or even participate in political activities. Otherwise, they would risk losing the scholarship.

¹⁵ Interview with a former minister, December 9, 2020

¹⁶ Interview with Amer Bani Amer, the founder and General Director of Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development-RASED, December 1, 2020.

¹⁷ General Assessment of Parliamentary Elections 2020 in Jordan, published by Al-Quds Center for Political Studies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, November 2020.

¹⁸ وزارة الشؤون السياسية: نظام تمويل الأحزاب الجديد يعتمد على المشاركة في الانتخابات rb.gy/9ujmb1, September 15, 2020

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Interview with Oraib Al- Rantawi, founder and director general of Al Quds Center for Political Studies, December 6, 2020

²¹ Interview with Rami Adwan, Jordan Country Representative of the Netherlands Institute for Democracy, December 12, 2020.

Moreover, the electoral law consistently limits the participation of parties as well. After the Islamists made a strong showing in the 1989 elections, the government adopted a one-man, one-vote election law that replaced a system whereby voters were entitled to as many votes as the parliamentary seats allocated for their district. Since then, the election laws were amended and changed, but mostly continue to represent rural conservative districts while urban and Palestinian-dominated areas, which are Islamist strongholds, are underrepresented.

Unequal Representation

The practice of unequal representation (i.e. the ratio of voters per parliamentarian) is not uncommon in the United States and other democratic countries. In Jordan, however, it is considered one of the main drawbacks of the election law. Voting districts are gerrymandered to favor rural areas over urban areas, which undermines the representation of areas heavily populated by Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who make up a large share of the country's 10.5 million population. The urban areas are also strongholds for the Muslim Brotherhood, which draws the majority of its support from the Palestinian population. The gerrymandering of districts was also seen as a government tactic to marginalize the Muslim Brotherhood in parliament.

Under the current electoral law, Amman which has a population of 4.4 million and represents 42 percent of the population, has 28 seats out of 123 in parliament. Zarqa, with a population of 1.5 million or 14.3 percent of the population is represented only by 12 members. Meanwhile, the town of Tafilah, which has a population of nearly 30,000 and represents 1 percent of the population has four seats in parliament. Karak, which has a population of 350,000 or 3.3 percent of the population holds ten seats in parliament. Analysts have repeatedly pointed out this dichotomy; the disproportional representation of parliamentary seats explains according to some observers why voting has been historically low in Amman and Zarqa. Indeed, in the most recent elections, voting in Amman and Zarqa was significantly lower than the 2016 elections. In Amman's third constituency, it stood at 11.7 percent, down from 19.2 in the previous elections, a key indicator of public mistrust in the political process. In Zarqa's first constituency, it stood at 14.8 percent, down from 22.8 percent.²²

"The government justified the low voter turnout due to Covid-19, but in reality, the voter apathy reflects citizens' mistrust in parliament and the government. Several polls reveal that many Jordanians remain unconvinced with the electoral process and the democratic path," said Rami Adwan, Jordan Country Representative of the Netherlands Institute for Democracy.²³ However, another critic noted that the gerrymandering of districts boils down to identity politics, mostly intended to curb the representation of the Muslim Brotherhood in parliament. "Identity politics have a key role, it's the elephant in the room that nobody wants to discuss. Citizens in Amman and Zarqa, mostly inhabited by Jordanians of Palestinian origin, feel they are excluded from the political process."²⁴

Women Left Behind

Across the country, nearly half of the 4.64 million eligible voters were women, but like the rest of the country, they ran mostly on tribal and family loyalty. Despite an increase in women candidates only 360 out of the 1,674 candidates running were women. The requisite 15 women were elected, down from 20 in the previous parliament. Nevertheless, the increase of women candidates was a reflection of women's enthusiasm to have a voice and more confidence in their capability to serve.²⁵

The 2016 elections revealed that individuals, rather than lists, end up in parliament since only the top candidate is likely to win. In some cases, members in the list discouraged voters from supporting other candidates in their own list. The election law, therefore, weakened the chances for women to win in 2020 because several male

²² General Assessment of Parliamentary Elections 2020 in Jordan, published by Al-Quds Center for Political Studies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, November 2020

²³ Interview with Rami Adwan, Jordan Country Representative of the Netherlands Institute for Democracy, December 13, 2020

²⁴ Interview with a political analyst, December 10, 2020

²⁵ Interview with Amer Bani Amer, the founder and General Director of Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development-RASED, December 1, 2020.

candidates were reluctant to include politically astute females in their list, fearing they would win through direct competition, as a few did in 2016. One analyst considered the sidelining of women candidates by some male candidates as manipulating the system.

In 2020, women became a target by male candidates. They considered women candidates a threat. They discouraged voters from electing them because they learned in 2016 that women can win through direct competition and not only through the quota system in the list, so they did not want the women to succeed and secure more votes than them. Others chose women who were virtually unknown with no political background or experience. That way, the men could show they had a woman to fill the quota but she wouldn't pose a threat to them. Women voters also didn't cast their ballots.²⁶

Only 26.1 percent out of 46 percent eligible female voters cast their ballot in 2020. There were several explanations to this including general voter apathy, low trust in government, concerns about contracting the coronavirus and women shouldering the bulk of household chores and childcare. "The children were home on election day and the government decided to enforce a four-day curfew after the election results, so some women ended up staying at home while the husband went out to vote. Others were making sure they had enough food to last for four days. They were more concerned with food and supplies than voting."²⁷ The stereotypical gender roles contributed to the absence of women, in addition to the fear of contracting the coronavirus.

In Amman's third district, only 11,000 out of 31,000 of eligible female voters cast their ballots while in Amman's second district only 16 percent of women voted. Polls reveal the majority of those who cast their ballots, do so in favor of tribal members, relatives or a candidate recommended by their spouse.²⁸ Some analysts linked sociopolitical factors, including women's low participation in the labor market, to political empowerment. Only 13.2 percent of women participate in the labor market compared with 53.3 percent of men.²⁹ "More than 70 percent of women we surveyed say they will vote independently when they have economic independence", according to a Jordanian pollster.³⁰

Voices of Youth

Youth make up the vast majority of the Jordanian population with nearly 63 percent under the age of 30.³¹ Although there was a clear increase in youth casting their ballots in the 2020 elections, nearly 40 percent of youth surveyed prior to the elections said their tribal affiliation impacts their voting behavior. "I really believe that one of the reasons that youth have not had a presence in parliament is because elections are based on tribal affiliations instead of policy programs."³²

Young people have also expressed a desire for lowering the age of candidacy requirement from 30 to 25. As the largest segment of the population, youth today are concerned mainly with jobs, fair opportunities, and a promising future. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the youth's already dire economic conditions. Moreover, 45 percent of university graduates in Jordan said they want to emigrate,³³ one of the highest rates

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Oraib Al- Rantawi, founder and director general of Al Quds Center for Political Studies, December 6, 2020

²⁸ Interview with Muin Houry, a pollster and analyst on December 1, 2020

²⁹ Women's International Day, March 5, <http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/ar/womansday032020/>

³⁰ Interview with Amer Bani Amer, the founder and General Director of Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development- RASED, December 1, 2020.

³¹ Youth, A successful transition to adulthood for every child. <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/youth>

³² مؤتمر "الانتخابات النيابية وآفاق المرحلة القادمة"

الجلسة الاولى

"الانتخابات النيابية قراءة في المؤشرات والدلالات"

December 3, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=208354034076021&ref=watch_permalink

³³ Who is Thinking of Immigrating from the Middle East and North Africa, December 17, 2019,

<https://www.arabbarometer.org/ar/2019/12/5805>

in the region but also indicative of a sense of disenchantment by youth. They are giving up on the political process and reform in Jordan.

Despite RASSED's poll 60 days prior to the elections which revealed that nearly half of the surveyed young people said they do not plan to vote, youth made up the majority of the voters in this year's elections.³⁴ According to Muin Khoury, a pollster and analyst, youth have expressed a desire for a quota in parliament.

Despite many international and local capacity-building programs aimed at increasing youth participation in social and political life as well as building their skills to become community leaders, their overall social and political participation remains limited. In 2020, RASSED noted that 53 percent of youth don't consider the candidate's political affiliation when casting their ballots.³⁵ Even in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, over 75 percent of Jordanians were not interested in Jordan's political parties, and over 14 percent of them did not trust these parties.³⁶ Ten years after, a pre-election poll conducted by NAMA on behalf of KAS revealed that 69% of Jordanians said they would not vote for a candidate that belongs to a political party.³⁷

Role of Media

Most Jordanians are turning to four main sources to consume news: Facebook, WhatsApp, online news websites, and television.³⁸ The overwhelming majority of internet users in Jordan are between 18 and 35 years old.³⁹ Digitization -- the conversion of information into digital formats -- in Jordan had a profound impact on news and the consumption of information. This switchover has challenges for content to be produced by individuals and challenges to traditional media and journalism.

Nearly 70 percent of youth surveyed said social media was a major news source and can have a positive impact on their decision whether to participate in the 2020 elections.⁴⁰ Due to the coronavirus, traditional ground campaigning, door-to-door visits and events could not take place and so, social media played a big role in the 2020 elections. Social media had two main roles: promoting the candidates -- whether by setting up Facebook pages or advertisements on online news websites -- and revealing voter fraud including with videos documenting the buying and selling of votes.

"Social media was extremely influential because there were no [television] debates, so it was used by deputies to present their views and a few had virtual meetings but I can't imagine this election or campaigning without

³⁴ [https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications: https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-2020](https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-2020)

³⁵ [https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications: https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-2020](https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-2020)

³⁶ دراسة:غالبية الأردنيين غير مهتمين بالأحزاب السياسية و48% لا يدعمون الحركات الشعبية - صحيفة الرأي <http://alrai.com/article/559004.html>, December 24, 2012,

³⁷ KAS/NAMA Pre-Parliamentary Elections 2020 Survey: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/jordanien/single-title/-/content/pre-parliamentary-elections-2020-survey>

³⁸ Jordan Media Assessment, June 9, 2020, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WQVH.pdf

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ [https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications: https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-2020](https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/https://www.rasedjo.com/ar/publications/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-2020)

social media," said Rana Sabbagh, founder of Arab Reporter for Investigative Journalism and Senior MENA Investigations editor at The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.⁴¹

The media spokesperson for Jordan's Independent Election Commission, Jihad al-Momani, said that the elections were tainted with dirty money and confirmed the existence of videos documenting the phenomenon that have been referred to the public prosecutor's office. He also pointed out that social media had contributed to false rumors, including videos circulated on social media that were old, unrelated to the elections or rumors about the virus and polling stations. "Social media had a big role in revealing voter fraud and vote-buying because people were posting videos proving this but at the same time it needed to be verified."⁴² Momani acknowledged vote-buying had occurred at several polling stations and said that authorities had been alerted of these breaches. He confirmed that arrests were made on charges of corruption and that five cases related to corrupt money on the day of the election were referred to the judiciary.⁴³

Social media also played a part in the aftermath of the elections. Videos posted on social media revealed celebratory gunfire and gatherings with no health precautions being taken. The depiction of lawlessness led to the resignation of the interior minister and the confiscation of weapons and arrests. It also increased the sense of tribal elections.⁴⁴ Without social media, none of these videos shot by people in the crowds and posted on social media would have been revealed.

Muslim Brotherhood: Struggling to Adapt

The election results revealed that the Islamist-led National Alliance Reform (the Reform List) garnered 10 seats, down from 15. The Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood's political party, said six out of ten seats it won went to IAF members, and the remaining four were secured by their independent allies. However, after two female parliamentarians recently withdrew, the Reform List has 8 seats in parliament.⁴⁵

The Brotherhood's list and their allies won 83,000 ballots representing 6.5 percent of the vote in the 14 districts they contested. This is significantly lower than the 2016 elections, where they won 157,000 or 11.6 percent of the votes.⁴⁶ In Amman and Zarqa, traditional strongholds for the Muslim Brotherhood, the voter turnout was low. Since the areas are largely inhabited by Jordanians of Palestinian origin, the vote is generally not based on tribal affiliations. In Amman, the voting percentage stood at 15 percent down from 23 in the previous elections. In Zarqa, the "Reform List" secured one seat, down from two in the 2016 elections.⁴⁷

"The vote in these areas is based on political considerations. People there are convinced that the election results were already predetermined and therefore, they believe that there is no point in voting. They also believe that parliament is ineffective. Even in tribal areas, voter turnout was low. We are aware of our political weight in the streets and the election outcome did not reflect this as a result of the election law, the interventions by authorities and the pressure they exerted on members and allies to withdraw from lists, in addition to the black money. These are the worst elections."⁴⁸

⁴¹ Interview with Rana Sabbagh, founder of Arab Reporter for Investigative Journalism and Senior MENA Investigations editor at The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, December 13, 2020.

⁴² المومني: شراء الأصوات يزداد قرب الساعة 7 و5 قضايا إلى المدعي العام، November 10, 2020, <https://www.ammonnews.net/article/575871>

⁴³ إحالة مرشحين من بينهم فانزون بالانتخابات إلى الادعاء العام بتهمة شراء أصوات، November 15, 2020, <https://www.addustour.com/articles/1182463>

⁴⁴ Jordan's Interior Minister Resigns after Outcry Over Breaches in COVID-19 lockdown, November 12, 2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-jordan-lockdown/jordans-interior-minister-resigns-after-outcry-over-breaches-in-covid-19-lockdown-idUKL8N2HY83X>

⁴⁵ Interview with Murad Adayleh, Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front, January, 29, 2021

⁴⁶ Interview with Murad Adayleh, Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front, December 5, 2020

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

However, the Muslim Brotherhood's loss in the parliamentary elections was not unexpected. It fits regional trends after several Arab countries classified the group as a terrorist organization. Internationally, the movement came to be seen as a conveyor belt, facilitating violent extremism rather than a firewall. The Muslim Brotherhood was also weakened after the government revoked its license in 2016. Last year, the Court of Cassation issued its final ruling dissolving the group on grounds that it failed to rectify its legal status.⁴⁹ The Brotherhood has also faced internal rifts and its members were divided on whether to boycott or participate in the elections.

The Brotherhood boycotted parliamentary elections in 1997, 2010 and 2013, citing vote rigging and electoral laws that discriminated against them. The group's participation in this year's elections came at a time when their ties with the regime have hit rock bottom. The government accused the Brotherhood of exerting its hegemony over the Teacher's Association and blamed the movement of instigating the Teacher's strike last year, the longest in Jordan's history, even though there are only three Brotherhood members out of the ten members in the Teachers Association Council.⁵⁰

"If we look at the numbers, the Islamists have lost, but tactically they are winners. The Brotherhood is pragmatic. It is well aware that the government tried to minimize its presence in parliament, particularly after the Teacher's Association saga, even though the movement was not behind the strike or the demands to increase the teachers' salaries. Instead of boycotting the elections like they did in the past, they managed to avoid being excluded. By participating in the elections, the Brotherhood maintained its presence in the political scene at a time when it was classified as a terrorist group by countries in the region. The Brotherhood wants to be part of the game otherwise it will lose since it has already lost regionally and internationally."⁵¹

Still, the movement's decision to participate in the elections may have lent the government the legitimacy it needed, despite the bleak election mood, voter apathy and declining trust in the government. It was seen as a gesture of goodwill from the Brotherhood to the government which so far did not follow in the footsteps of its Gulf allies who labeled the group a terrorist organization.

"The Brotherhood managed to get its point across. Its presence in parliament is necessary to label the elections as democratic," said Amer Sabaileh.⁵² However, the Muslim Brotherhood remains in a hard place. "The Brotherhood chose to be a player and endorse the game, while losing in order to avoid harassment," said Rami Adwan, Jordan Country Representative of the Netherlands Institute for Democracy.⁵³

What's Next?

Only two months after the 19th parliamentary elections, King Abdullah, has publicly called for political reform. "We must revisit laws regulating political life, such as the election, political parties, and local administration laws, and continue political development efforts."⁵⁴

Today, Jordanians are aware that parliament lacks real power to make effective change or represent their constituents. The sense of disenchantment was obvious by the voter turnout particularly in the biggest urban centers -- Amman and Zarqa. Without addressing the lack of political will so far by the political elite in Jordan, including reform in the electoral law and obvious gerrymandering, it will be hard to move forward. This of

⁴⁹ Court deems old Muslim Brotherhood dissolved since 1953, June 13, 2019, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/court-deems-old-muslim-brotherhood-dissolved-1953>

⁵⁰ Interview with Hasan Abu Hanieh, analyst and expert on Islamic movements, December 14, 2020

⁵¹ Interview with Amer Sabaileh, a political analyst, December 1, 2020

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Interview with Rami Adwan, Jordan Country Representative of the Netherlands Institute for Democracy, December 13, 2020

⁵⁴ King Abdullah Interview, Petra News Agency, January 30, 2021, https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=31986&lang=en&name=en_news

course, touches upon identity politics in Jordan and remains a thorny issue to discuss. However, the status quo is hard to maintain, especially in light of the economic woes that are being exacerbated by the onslaught of the coronavirus and its implications.

In order for the Jordanian government to build confidence with youth, who make up the biggest share of the population, they must allow for more civic space and participation. Meanwhile, the defense or emergency laws that were introduced during the pandemic should not be used to stifle public expression and to curb freedoms. Despite the amendments in the electoral law to encourage political parties to forge alliances and blocs in parliament, the law remains the biggest hurdle to a true representation in the legislature since it limits the number of seats due to the way the law is designed. At the same time, the discourse of political parties in Jordan are antiquated and fail to appeal to Jordanians. The Muslim Brotherhood has also been weakened locally, regionally and internationally. Therefore, the government's tactics in the past to inflate their threat in order to avoid reforms is no longer a viable strategy.

This election also revealed that women's standing in both politics and power remains extremely weak and they continue to be left behind. Their limited presence in the labor market and general lack of economic independence is also indicative of their lack of political influence. In the near future, the dire economic situation in Jordan will no doubt be taking center stage as countries in the world begin to recover from the pandemic crisis and its aftermath.

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