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King Abdullah is this Round's Winner

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The parliamentary elections in Jordan on January 23, 2013 failed to produce a clear answer as to the impact of the Arab uprisings on the kingdom's real balance of power between the establishment, headed by the King, and the opposition, led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Both sides stayed deeply entrenched in their initial positions, with the King insisting on holding the election within the limited changes he agreed to, and the Brotherhood insisting on boycotting it given the government's refusal to accept its demands regarding amendments to the election law.

During the public and parliamentary debate King Abdullah II agreed to some changes to the election law, but these were mostly cosmetic and certainly not enough to limit the monarch's power in any significant way. Perhaps the most important change was the one allowing voters to vote for national lists. Of the 150 seats in parliament, eligible citizens could cast their votes for candidates in their constituencies, which clearly favored the tribal candidates, and an additional vote for a list competing for 27 seats on a national level. The remaining 15 were reserved for women. The ratio between the number of local seats and the number of national seats was a point of dispute with the opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, which estimated that its strength is mostly on the national rather than the constituency level.

Because the Brotherhood boycotted the election, it is difficult to assess the validity of that estimate. However, three statistics suggest the movement has overrated its strength. On two occasions, the opposition tried to rally its supporters to participate in anti-election demonstrations. The first time, in November 2012, the organizers expected a turnout of 50,000, but ended with only 10,000. Even if one assumes that the security services stopped a similar number from reaching the location of the demonstration, the number of protesters fell far below the numerical goal set by the organizers. On the second occasion, a demonstration held days before the election, on January 18, 2013, in Jabel Hussein, Amman, was attended by only 2,000 demonstrators, a mere one-tenth of the 20,000 expected by the organizers. The third indicator and the most significant failure was the Muslim Brotherhood's failure to keep voter turnout decidedly low, even though the

Jordanian regime gave them the means to do so. According to the new election law, those who wanted to realize their right to vote had to register before election day. Of all eligible voters, 70 percent, i.e., 2.3 million citizens, registered despite the pressure of the opposition. This represents a high percentage of the population, which in the past showed lower rates of participation in the political system.¹

In the elections itself, only 1.23 million people both overcame the first hurdle of early registration and actually reached the polling booths. Yet it is doubtful that the Muslim Brotherhood could have used 40 percent voter participation (out of a total of three million Jordanian citizens eligible to vote) to challenge the election and its results as representative of the will of the Jordanian citizens. The results of the national ballots cast are also problematic to an extent, but this too is insufficient to strengthen opposition claims. No fewer than 61 lists vied for the 27 seats reserved for nationally elected candidates, but only one-third made it into the new parliament. The other lists that failed to enter received about one-quarter of the total votes, and those votes were thus "wasted." King Abdullah II is contemplating further reforms in the political parties and election laws, as he would like to see fewer parties that present platforms encompassing all of the basic issues affecting Jordanian society.²

Of the 27 seats reserved for nationally elected candidates, the Islamic Center Party won three, and together with the 13 seats it won in the constituencies, it has become a significant player, enabling it to claim the role of the parliament Speaker and participate in the recommendations to the King on whom to appoint as prime minister. When the King was asked in an interview whether he could live with a Muslim Brotherhood prime minister, he avoided responding directly, preferring to point out that in Egypt only 12 percent voted for the Brotherhood, adding that he views bringing this movement back into the process of reforms in Jordan as an important challenge. The King also suggested that 12 percent is likely an accurate reflection of the Muslim Brotherhood's real strength in Jordan as well.

At this stage of the domestic power struggle between the King and the opposition, the King has the upper hand. A significant portion of Jordanian society, representing all its strata, participated in the election on the basis of the new election law supported by King Abdullah, while the opposition's demands, which would have limited his authority, were rejected. The mild criticism voiced by some 400 foreign observers failed to support opposition challenges about the integrity of the election. The fact that 19 women³ were elected – a new record in Jordanian history – only strengthens the reliability of the election results in the eyes of most Jordanians.

The struggle between the King and the opposition will continue, both in the parliament, where it will be played out by the representatives who do not come from the traditional, mainly tribal, stronghold, which has maintained its power, and outside of parliament, in the

public arena. In all of his public remarks, King Abdullah II has referred to the reforms as an ongoing process and he will be under pressure to expand them.⁴

The stability of the Jordanian regime depends not only on domestic politics. Part of the criticism, especially on the part of the traditional supporters of the palace, stems from economic hardships that most probably will not be resolved in the near future, especially given the fact that the Jordanian government has been told it must cut subsidies as a condition for receiving aid from various international institutions. (For several days, there have been sporadic demonstrations in the kingdom, in part because of the economic situation.) Jordan received promises of aid from the oil producers in the Gulf, but this assistance is slow in coming, as the contributing nations would rather see a slower pace of regime reform and decentralization of authority. The large influx of Syrian refugees, currently assessed at more than 300,000, is placing a heavy financial burden on the Hashemite kingdom, and the assistance designed to help Jordan absorb them will not solve all the problems, especially if the refugees remain in Jordan for an extended period.

One may assume that the Muslim Brotherhood's failure to stabilize its rule in Egypt and the horrors of the violence in Syria will limit the power of Jordan's opposition, but the King's future path is hardly rosy.

¹ A survey of July 2012 showed that most respondents were unaware of the main details of the new election law. Thirty-three percent of respondents said they would vote for the tribal parties, while 21 percent said they would vote for Islamic candidates, including those of the Muslim Brotherhood. See IRI Poll: Jordanians Split over Direction of Country, Economy and Corruption Cited as Top Concerns," The International Republican Institute, September 24, 2012, <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-poll-jordanians-split-over-direction-country-economy-and-corruptio>.

² Interview of King Abdullah II by Fareed Zakaria, *CNN*, January 25, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/25/world/meast/syria-unrest/index.html>.

³ Two directly, two in national parties, and 15 in districts where seats were reserved for women.

⁴ Despite his boast that Jordan is a constitutional monarchy with limits on the king; in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*, as translated into English in *Jordan Times*, January 13, 2013.