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Jordan's 2013 elections: a further boost for tribes

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Executive summary

The 2013 parliamentary elections in Jordan came after two years of protests demanding democratic reform. This report is based on qualitative interviews with protesters and politicians in Jordan since 2011. Protesters wanted change to the undemocratic "one-person-one-vote" election law, which favours tribal candidates over urban areas where the Muslim Brotherhood has strong support. The elections were dominated by independent and tribal candidates who used general slogans and often lacked either an ideology or a political strategy. Constituencies were usually candidates' relatives and friends. In a context of weak political parties, the tribes resurfaced as the main link between the people and the authorities.

Jordan has about three million eligible voters. Roughly two million registered for the elections, but only one million voted. With support from one-third of the voters, the new parliament continues to have a weak legitimacy, despite transparent and fair elections. As a result the street protests are expected to continue. But Jordanians have learned from the Arab Spring: they fear the instability experienced in neighbouring countries. Stability is now more precious than change and secular protesters are dreading the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power. Having learned that the Brotherhood does not bring their kind of democratic development, people in Jordan will demand reform instead of revolution.

Introduction

From the outset the 2013 elections in Jordan were considered to be free and fair, but they did not address the fundamental issues facing Jordanian society. While previous elections have been hampered by high levels of fraud, few such complaints surfaced after the 2013 elections. However, insofar as the 17th Jordanian parliament is based on only one-third of all eligible voters, it can hardly be seen as a representative body. As a result street protests against and other forms of opposition to the parliament and government are expected to continue.

This report argues that the greatest democratic hurdle that Jordan currently faces is the imbalance between demographic realities and political leverage. The ethnic division seems to be utilised in a game of divide and rule to curb democratic development and is exploited by the ruling elite to protect their privileges. Other obstacles to democratic progress are corruption, particularly connected to the management and sale of state property, and also the tradition of vote buying that resembles patron-client relations, which together are alienating people from politics and elections, above all among younger generations of Jordanians. The minimal representation of women is another obstacle to democratic progress. Will this discontent threaten the king? Not at the moment, because it is acknowledged in wide sectors of Jordanian society that the king is keeping a divided society together. People in Jordan seem to be seeking stability in the turbulent surroundings of the Middle East, having learned the price of instability paid by their neighbours.

The 2013 parliamentary elections came after two years of street protests, cutting short the parliamentary period since the last elections in 2010 by nearly two years. The Islamic Action Front, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, led several smaller parties in a boycott of the 2010 elections in a protest against the "one-person-one-

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vote" election law, which limits the vote for each eligible voter to one candidate only and which they regard as completely undemocratic. In combination with grave accusations of election fraud, the 2010 parliament lacked legitimacy among large segments of the Jordanian opposition. When the king pushed for parliamentary elections in 2013, after two years of protests demanding democratic and economic reforms, he assumed that the elections would form the cornerstone of a continued reform process. This belief was based on two assumptions: firstly, that the new Independent Election Committee would observe international standards of integrity and transparency in the elections, and secondly, because he had decided to abandon the tradition of appointing prime ministers and governments himself and had instead introduced a parliamentary government system based on the majority bloc in parliament (*Jordan Times*, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c).

This report assesses the particular dynamics leading up to the 2013 parliamentary elections, before moving on to analyse the election process and its outcome. It focuses particularly on how the elections relate to the protest movement and its calls for economic and democratic reform.

Democracy in Jordan

Jordan's road to democracy has not been smooth and has been hampered by wars and waves of refugees seeking protection in the country. The influx of Palestinian refugees to Jordan, starting in 1948, which shifted the country's demographic balance in favour of the Palestinians, has since created the main fault line in the population. Most Palestinian refugees were granted citizenship after 1950 and the Jordanian leadership has aimed to develop a democracy that includes all citizens, ending discriminatory practices and a common feeling among Jordanians of Palestinian origin that they are second-class citizens.

Jordanian elections started in 1929, but initially produced weak parliaments without an opposition. Also, the elections after independence in 1946 lacked candidates from the opposition, while the elections after Jordan's annexation of the West Bank in 1948 evenly distributed parliamentary seats between East Bankers and candidates of Palestinian origin. The elections in 1956, however, under pressure from Pan-Arabic nationalism and anti-colonialism, are still regarded as one of the freest elections in Jordan's history, with the leftists taking 50% of the seats in parliament. But after an attempted leftist coup d'état in 1957, the king suspended parliament and enforced martial law, repressing all political opposition for the next 30 years (Halaby, 2013). Oppression further hardened after the internal war between Palestinian guerrillas and the Jordanian army in 1970, known as "Black September". There were no elections in Jordan until 1989, after riots against economic hardships were appeased through political concessions.

In 1989 the electorate could vote for both individual candidates and party lists, giving the Muslim Brotherhood's party, the Islamic Action Front, the major bloc in parliament. The 1989 elections are also regarded as among the freest and fairest ever held in Jordan, but new restrictions were soon put in place to limit the role of the Islamists after their landslide victory. The election law was restructured from a proportional representation system into a single, non-transferable vote system, called the "one-person-one-vote" system. And perhaps more important was the reorganisation of electoral districts to systematically favour East Bank Jordanian candidates from tribal areas and under-represent urban areas dominated by constituencies with a Palestinian background, who were more likely to vote for the Islamic party. This change was aimed at curtailing Islamist influence.

The Arab Spring

When the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010 and early 2011, Jordanians had been protesting for a year against deteriorating economic conditions. Early Jordanian protests took the form of labour protests, with strikes and sit-ins against the privatisation of state companies and demonstrations calling for more rights for workers. Emboldened by the events in neighbouring countries at the start of 2011, these protests continued on a regular basis and started to include new groups of youth and the unemployed. Even the powerful organisation for military veterans started to express its dismay over the situation in the kingdom. Although the protests never achieved the kind of mass mobilisation seen in Egypt and Tunisia, they represented a significant change among Jordanians. This change is often described as "breaking the fear" that had silenced people from demanding their rights during years of martial law and restrictions on political activity. Despite the limited numbers of protesters on the streets, their main demands were and still are perceived as reflecting the concerns of large segments of society, but still not important enough to put the stability of the kingdom at risk.

Some protest groups continued to focus on economic issues and labour reforms. They particularly blamed corruption as the main cause of Jordan's economic problems, in combination with deteriorating economic conditions for workers and public sector employees. Many of the protesters complained that their salaries could no longer cover the price hikes on fuel and basic foods. This trend grew worse with the restructuring programmes for public sector salaries and cuts in subsidies on fuel and energy to deal with the country's increasing fiscal debt. With growing rates of unemployment, particularly among educated youth, dissatisfaction was brewing. Protesters held the government responsible for these problems and called for the prime minister to step down.

Other protesters went beyond the initial demand for economic reform and called for comprehensive democratic

reforms, including a reduction of the king's power by strengthening parliament and making the prime minister more accountable to the people. To achieve this goal they also called for reform of the political party law and a change in the unpopular one-person-one-vote election law. The king himself was not a target in Jordan's Arab Spring in the way that top leaders had been elsewhere in the Arab world.

The problem of corruption

It was neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor other opposition parties that started the most recent round of protests in Jordan, but a small youth group formed years before in a little town called Deeban to address poverty and marginalisation in the Jordanian countryside. In the past tribal farmers were the core group behind support for the royal family, but had come to see their traditional livelihoods suffer under a combination of economic restructuring programmes and lack of rain. Rural people were then given preference in appointments to public sector jobs in return for supporting the monarchy. Large segments of the tribal workforce were absorbed into the army and security forces. However, when King Abdullah II came to the throne in 1999 he brought with him economic neoliberals who wished to modernise the economic sector. Policies focused on privatisation and the reduction of public sector costs to control the deficit in the state budget. As a result the traditional social contract between the Hashemite regime and the East Bank Jordanian tribes was undermined, i.e. the contract based on loyalty to the regime in return for giving the tribes priority in services and appointments to public sector jobs. The new economic policy simultaneously strengthened a private sector dominated by Jordanians of Palestinian background, which increased both their economic dominance and political influence (Hamid & Freer, 2011; Stemman, 2011; Vogt, 2011). Thus, new economic policies led to the impoverishment of rural Jordanians, while privileging urban Jordanians with a Palestinian background.

Corruption was a focus of complaint that was repeated across a series of interviews with activists in the protest movement and politicians from different political parties and groups since 2011. Corruption remains a primary challenge for Jordan and is seen as a root cause of the country's economic problems. Accusations of corruption have been directed against the highest echelons of power, including the royal family (ICG, 2012). Queen Rania is often criticised for her expensive tastes, but more serious are questions about the growing wealth of her family, which arouses greater suspicions because of its Palestinian origin.

The government has started to respond to allegations of corruption by arresting and prosecuting prominent figures in society. There have been parliamentary hearings about the Dead Sea casino scandal, while the mayor of Amman was also arrested, but perhaps most important is the conviction and sentencing of a former intelligence chief to 13 years of hard labour for money laundering and embezzling public funds (Schenker, 2013). However, these steps have been seen as largely symbolic and insufficient to combat corruption and restore public confidence. The measures taken are superficial and cosmetic and are still not enough to convince ordinary members of the public that the problem is being taken seriously.

Many claim that the arrests and prosecutions are only a game to demonstrate a firm stance on corruption, but the suspects are soon cleared of the charges laid against them and free to continue their activities. An example is Khaled Shaheen, a convicted businessman serving three years in prison for graft, who was permitted to leave Jordan for extended medical treatment in the U.S. The story turned into a scandal when he was spotted in London dining at an expensive restaurant with his family (Watkins, 2011). Nonetheless, there seems to be increased awareness of the problem and corruption was high on the agenda of many of the candidates in the 2013 parliamentary elections, although mostly in very general terms and without clear programmes for how to solve the problem.

A divided society

The main challenge for democratic reform and development in Jordan is the demographic division between the original Jordanian, mostly tribal, population and the population of Palestinian origin. History and alliances have positioned the former group at the centre of power in Jordan, while the latter group is seeking to improve its position through democratic reform and better representation. The reform process thus becomes double-edged: it is necessary for modernisation and economic development, but threatens what East Bankers call Jordan's national identity. The latter argue that giving the Palestinian Jordanians full political rights would turn East Bankers into a political minority.

When King Abdullah I annexed what was left of Palestine's West Bank after the Arab-Israeli war in 1948 and generously gave the Palestinian refugees full citizenship, Jordan became home to two major population groups with distinct interests and political ambitions. The East Bank Jordanians supported the Hashemite monarchy, while the Palestinian refugees sought the establishment of a Palestinian state and the return of the refugees to their Israeli-occupied lands, manifested in guerilla attacks on Israel. With ambitions towards establishing a greater Jordan, King Hussein, who ascended to the throne in 1952, aimed to create a unified identity for all of Jordan's citizens. This plan was threatened by the activities of Palestinian guerillas, who challenged the state's monopoly on the use of force. When this conflict developed into a civil war in 1970, the unity policy was put on trial as East Bank Jordanians questioned the trustworthiness of Jordanians of Palestinian background. As a result, martial law – in force since 1957 – was reinforced with severe restrictions on

political activity (Abu-Odeh, 1999; Farah, 1999; Lucas, 2008; Shultz & Hammer, 2003).

Palestinian refugees kept their citizenship, but political participation became very sensitive. Under the logic of patron-client relationships, where loyalty to the regime earned economic benefits, the East Bankers' devotion to the king was rewarded with jobs in the public sector, while the "disloyal" Palestinians had to care for themselves in the private sector. The result was economic segregation between the East Bankers and Jordanians of Palestinian origin that was almost institutionalised in what Abu-Odeh (1999) has called a "de-Palestinianization process", which not only separated economic activity along ethnic lines, but also politically favoured East Bankers through the election law and appointments to political positions.

However, the economic division between East Bankers and Jordanian Palestinians has become more blurred over the years. Particularly the neoliberal economic policies of the last decade, which have resulted in a booming private sector, making many Palestinian business owners rich, have opened the eyes of East Bankers to the opportunities in the private sector. Hence you will now find East Bank Jordanians also doing well in this sector. The majority of East Bank public employees can, however, only watch with regret as the public sector lags behind in terms of work opportunities and wage levels, which is a point that was often voiced by demonstrators participating in the recent wave of protests.

For Jordanians of Palestinian origin, the public sector is not as closed as it used to be. Statistics show that about 16% of the workforce with a Palestinian background work in the public sector, which is roughly half the proportion of the East Bank Jordanian workforce in the sector.[2] Nonetheless, the perception still prevails that the public sector with its many benefits for employees is off limits to Jordanians of Palestinian origin. This perception has created a sense of discrimination among many Jordanian Palestinians, made real by different treatment from public servants and threats of losing their citizenships. The reality, however, might be that it is the army and the security sector that are out of reach of Palestinian Jordanians, while the rest of the public sector is now open to them. Nonetheless, both groups are exposed to mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion: they both feel included in one economic sector, while excluded from another. The result is that both groups speak of a sense of marginalisation.

The division between East Bankers and Palestinian Jordanians is the most significant fault line in Jordanian society and has implications for politics in general and elections in particular. The population of Jordan is about six and a half million. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East there are roughly two million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan who enjoy full citizenship (UNRWA, 2012). About 140,000 refugees originally from Gaza have residency, but are denied citizenship, as are many Palestinians who migrated from the West Bank to Jordan after Jordan's disengagement from the Palestinian territory in 1988. In addition, many Palestinian refugees of better means did not see the need to register as refugees. They live as well-integrated Jordanian citizens, but remain very conscious of their Palestinian origin. On top of this, large numbers of Palestinians moved to Jordan before the Arab-Israeli wars in search of public sector jobs or for other economic or family reasons. The result is that it is assumed that more than half the population in Jordan is of Palestinian origin, although exact numbers are hard to calculate. Despite being the majority, Jordanians of Palestinian origin are under-represented in parliament and the government (Minority Rights Group International, 2008).

Many Jordanians of Palestinian background tend to interpret the election law's favouring of candidates from tribal areas as an intentional under-representation not only of urban areas, but also of Palestinian Jordanians, who are heavily concentrated in these areas. Such measures are adding to the feeling among this group of being second-class citizens. They also face discrimination in the education system and Palestinian detainees are more likely to be tortured by Jordan's security forces, according to Amnesty International (Minority Rights Group International, 2008). There is a common notion that the regime is using the fault line between East Bankers and Jordanian Palestinians to undermine any possibility of national unity or, even worse, as a divide-and-rule tactic (Brand & Hammad, 2013). The policy of divide and rule is recognised by many opposition politicians and members of the protest movements as a strategy used by the regime to maintain power and avoid change. A prominent opposition politician added that the regime controls people of Palestinian origin by threatening to revoke their national number[3] if they raise political issues perceived to be against Jordan's interests. Under the threat of losing their citizenship, many Palestinian Jordanians are reduced to the role of observers of the political process rather than being active participants in society. Simultaneously, East Bank Jordanians are subtly reminded about the constant threat that "Palestinians" might "take over the country" through references to "Black September" and the Israeli policy of "Jordan as Palestine", keeping the fault line firmly in place.[4]

2 Statistics extracted from Fafo surveys of Palestinian refugees in and outside camps implemented in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Reports forthcoming.

3 While all Palestinian refugees became Jordanian citizens after the annexation of the West Bank in 1950, a system of ID cards was introduced for statistical reasons in 1980: green cards for people living in the West Bank and yellow cards for people of Palestinian origin with family or businesses in the West Bank. After Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank in 1988, green-card holders living in the West Bank lost their citizenship. From 1992 a system of national numbers was introduced and only citizens with such a number had access to government services and were permitted to open a bank account and obtain a driving licence. Many yellow-card holders were somewhat arbitrarily stripped of their national numbers after 1988. Without clear regulations for the procedure, this threat now looms over Jordanians with a Palestinian refugee background (Jamjoun, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2010; Ryan, 2010).

4 Author interview with a left-wing politician, Amman, March 28th 2012.

Elections and the electoral system

The protests in Jordan addressed economic hardship and connected it to governance, demanding better representatives who could improve their situation. The king responded quickly by replacing prime ministers and revoking planned subsidy cuts – at least for a while. The king also appointed committees to move the stalled reform process forward, including a National Dialogue Committee with the mandate to revise the unpopular one-person-one-vote law. The committee suggested a two-tier system with open lists for 115 deputies elected proportionally at the local level, in addition to 15 seats selected from national lists.[5] The proposal failed to address the gerrymandering of electoral districts that gave preference to tribal areas at the expense of urban districts (Hamid & Freer, 2011). This proposal was disregarded when parliament later amended the election law. Instead, the one-person-one-vote law remained largely intact and was extended only by another vote to be used in a proportional list system to elect 27 candidates at the national level. Parliament was enlarged from 120 to 150 seats, with a quota of 15 female members, one from each governorate, including an increase of three seats for women from the Bedouin districts, which strengthened tribal representation further.

As mentioned above, the one-person-one-vote system was originally designed to deal with the surge of Islamists in the parliament of 1989, which was elected by a proportional representation system at the local level. The kingdom's traditional powerbase in the tribal areas, often centred around individual tribal leaders, was weakened under the proportional list system. Gerrymandering and the one-person-one-vote system were introduced to strengthen tribal influence. The one-person-one-vote system has since been repeatedly criticised for systematically favouring tribal candidates and neglecting urban areas where political parties and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood have strong constituencies.

Because Jordanian protests did not turn against the regime, unlike the case in neighbouring countries, reform of the election law was one of the main targets of protests. When this demand was not met, trust towards the regime was decreased in many constituencies, but still not enough to make them call for the removal of the king. Some measures have also been taken to strengthen the electoral process by establishing the Independent Election Committee to organise and monitor elections in an effort to avoid the fraud and vote buying prevalent in former elections. Still, many doubt that such efforts are enough to restore trust in and the integrity of the election process. The Muslim Brotherhood therefore decided to boycott the 2013 elections, leading a few smaller groups in the boycott.

Jordan has a total of 3.7 million eligible voters, 2.3 million of whom registered for the elections to the 17th Jordanian parliament on January 23rd 2013. They were issued with picture-carrying ID voting cards to combat vote buying and fraud. Some informants claimed that public employees and others had been coerced to register for the elections to raise the registration rate above 70%. The voters were assigned to 45 election districts. More than 30,000 election staff implemented the elections in nearly 1,500 polling stations, in addition to 4,500 volunteers to aid disabled voters and others that needed assistance. The elections were overseen by about 7,000 local observers, in addition to 500 international election observers. Police and gendarmerie were deployed at polling stations to ensure voter safety.[6]

Political parties

The strengthening of Jordanian political parties is pivotal for the development of a democratic parliamentary system in the kingdom. Political parties have existed in Jordan since the foundation of the state in 1921, but initially they mainly represented the country's traditional social structure. The constitution of 1952 laid down the right of citizens to establish political parties and the 1950s saw parliamentary elections based on party coalitions. However, when martial law was imposed in 1957, political parties and political activity were banned for 30 years (al-Attiyat et al., 2005). Today political parties still appear weak, a fact often attributed to this ban and years of clandestine party organisation.

The only exception was the Muslim Brotherhood, at the time only registered as a charitable organisation and not a political party. Islamic activities were seen as a counterforce to nationalist Pan-Arabism and were presumed not to be a threat to the monarchy at the time. When political parties were permitted once more after the rebellion in 1989 opened up the country to democratic reform, the Muslim Brotherhood had already gained an economic foundation and organisational experience superior to the underground work of other political parties.

In a context of weak political parties, the tribes resurfaced as the main channel for links between the people and the authorities. Although martial law weakened democratic institutions by placing most power in the hands of the king, Luster-Okar (2006) has argued that elections under an authoritarian regime are still an important area for competition. But this competition will be over patronage rather than policy, meaning that voters cast their ballots for those who can deliver goods and services. They prefer voting for candidates who maintain good relations with the ruling elites and with whom the voters often have personal ties. Similarly, elites are more likely to run in elections if they do not oppose the regime, giving a pro-regime bias to

5 Author interview with a member of the National Dialogue Committee, Amman, March 28th 2012.
6 Author interview with a spokesperson of the Independent Election Committee, Amman, January 20th 2013.

parliaments (Luster-Okar, 2006). Once again, tribalism is boosted, while political parties lose out.

The system of patronage is the foundation of what Muasher (2008; 2011) calls the "rentier system", in terms of which a small number of elite benefit from their position in society. These elite then form a counterforce against all initiatives for change and development that they perceive to be threatening their privileges and personal benefits. The consequence is not only a strong force working against reform, but also the creation of fertile ground for corruption and dishonesty. As a result, many Jordanians view the word "politician" negatively, seeing such a person primarily as someone who is mostly interested in enriching himself and not as representing other people's interests. In the end it is the political parties that carry the burden of this reputation, which adds to their difficulties in recruiting members and engaging people in politics. Political parties remain weak and are often seen as groups of people, often relatives and friends, gathered around a central figure who literally "owns" the party. Failing to create trust, politicians are often perceived as corrupt and mostly interested in seeing their pictures in the media.

The king claims to see the strengthening of political parties as fundamental to developing a more representative parliamentary system, as he outlined in speeches and documents ahead of the 2013 elections (*Jordan Times*, 2013a; 2013b). However, the last amendment of the political party law in June 2012 was perceived to make it more difficult for political parties rather than facilitating their contribution, e.g. the minimum number of founding members needed to establish a party was raised from 250 to 500. A parliamentarian also claimed that the new law mixed criminal law and political party law by punishing those who broke the political party law with prison terms.[7] This is a chilling reminder of the years of political persecution where prison terms, the confiscation of passports and internal displacement were frequent punishments for political activity.[8]

Main actors in the 2013 elections

With most political parties being small and weak, and in the absence of the most important party, the Islamic Action Front, the Jordanian polls were again dominated by independent and tribal candidates, figures from the establishment, and businessmen. Only a few candidates ran for political parties. This dominance of independent candidates is a direct result of the election law prioritising such candidates. A law amended by a parliament dominated by individual tribal members ensured that a similar parliament would be produced. Some powerful East Bank Jordanians reject a fully representative parliament that might see Islamists and Jordanians of Palestinian origin dominate the political-economic system. They reject the demands of the opposition – the Muslim Brotherhood and other leftist and Arab nationalist groups – for a fully representative parliament that would satisfy their demands for equality and accountability (Khouri, 2013). Although two-thirds of Jordanians live in urban areas, only one-third of parliamentary seats are allocated to represent these areas.

The number of candidates for the 2013 elections was 1,484, while a majority of 823 candidates belonged to lists that ran for the 27 national seats. These candidates were part of the 61 national lists. The rest of the candidates, totaling 661, were individual candidates running for local district seats. Voter turnout was reported to be 56% of registered voters, with a much higher turnout in the tribal areas and a low turnout in the cities. The turnout thus reflects different attitudes in rural and urban areas, corresponding to the election law's favouring of tribal areas and candidates.

Election campaigns among individual candidates were usually limited to general slogans, and an ideology and political strategy for the parliamentary period were largely absent. Observers said the candidates' slogans reflected a general concern over Jordan's economic situation. Uncertainties in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in several neighbouring countries have altered many people's priorities. Instead of seeking change, many paid more attention to domestic affairs, with political stability and daily livelihoods being more important. Candidates thus offered immediate solutions to individual needs among their constituencies, often focusing on service provision and bringing development to an area.[9] They failed to address broader national challenges with political programmes for the future (Hazaimeh, 2013). This dynamic merely reinforces election competition based on good relations with the regime, since access to limited resources such as public sector jobs will be of high importance for voters. The result may give even more power to a tribal establishment based on state patronage (al-Khalidi, 2013). This development thus reproduces the election logic described by Luster-Okar (2006), which is in the interests of the ruling elite (Muasher, 2008; 2011).

The 27 seats allocated to national lists were meant to boost the representation of political parties in parliament and strengthen their role in general. This aim failed, however, when most of the 61 lists were based on alliances among individual people rather than political parties. Most of the lists thus lacked capacity and experience to develop comprehensive programmes for political and economic reforms. National lists advocated general issues similar to those of individual candidates: the fight against corruption, tax reform, replacing guest workers with Jordanians to address unemployment and imposing higher taxes on

7 Author interview with a parliamentarian, Amman, June 6th 2012.
8 Information extracted from author interviews with Jordanian Palestinian refugees in 2010.
9 Author interview with a candidate for the 2013 parliamentary elections, Mafraq, January 19th 2013.
10 With the exception of the moderate Islamic Party winning three seats and two other lists taking two seats each.

mining firms. They did not address the main challenges that will face the kingdom over the next few years, like drawing up comprehensive plans for economic reform (Obeidat, 2013). When the election results were published, it also became apparent that most of the lists secured only one seat each in parliament.[10] The national ticket thus not only failed to boost political parties, but also failed to generate clearer political blocs in parliament. Instead, the results suggest that voting for national lists continued the same pattern seen at the district level, with the main focus on individuals trusted to deliver services to communities. Fragmentation of this kind was doubtless not the intention behind the national tickets, but was nevertheless its outcome.

Constituencies are often restricted to relatives and friends of the candidates, since many voters find it difficult to orient themselves among large numbers of candidates. With nearly 1,500 candidates, most of whom were without a defined ideology and clear political programme, many voters did not know who to trust. They were well aware that many leaders and politicians were accused of corruption and nepotism, making the decision even harder. It can feel safer to vote for a candidate known through personal relations. An interview with a 32-year-old taxi driver in Amman illustrates voters' difficulty in making a decision:

> I want to be involved in the election, but I do not know the candidates. So I do not know which one is better. I am convinced that they are doing their best to make this election fraud-free, but still I am not convinced by any of the candidates in this process. This is because in the previous parliament none of the MPs was working for the interest of the country and the citizens. I have registered and have an election card; I can vote in district number two in Amman. I have considered voting for the national list of the National Union, which is headed by Mr Mohammed Kashman.

Illuminatingly, when we informed him that this particular candidate had been arrested the previous day for election fraud, he said: "Okay then I will not vote for him. The reason I have been thinking of voting for him is because he has a lot of pictures all around town and he seems to have a jolly face."[11]

Interviews with young working-class Jordanians, mostly of Palestinian background, revealed low interest in the elections, and many had not even bothered to register for the election card.[12] These people were young, typically in their late twenties, both male and female, and had started working after high school instead of pursuing higher education. Explanations for their lack of interest in the elections, which took place only two days after the interviews, were lack of knowledge of and trust in any of the candidates. A history of election fraud combined with the one-person-one-vote election law added to their feeling of the election as a game among the powerful elite whose members were working only for themselves.

These young people did not trust any of the candidates to represent their interests. One exception was a young man who not only wanted to participate in the election, but also had decided on the candidate he was going to vote for. This candidate had visited the young man's household to give his family information about his election campaign. Through the home visit, a relationship was established between the candidate and the prospective voter, building trust to participate in the election. This example accentuates the importance of personal relationships between candidates and their constituencies, and how lack of them generates distrust, apathy and the non-involvement of youth.

Similar discussions with more educated and privileged youth in Amman showed the same tendency.[13] They said that young people preferred going to the shopping mall to engaging in elections and political work. They perceived elections to be rigged and to produce toothless parliaments with no agenda. The current changes to the election legislation were dismissed as cosmetic and did not convince youths to get involved in politics. An article in the *Jordan Times* confirms this impression of apathy among Jordanian youth, attributing it to empty slogans that failed to address genuine solutions for the country's problems in general and challenges for youth in particular (Abuqudairi, 2013).

Non-actors in the 2013 elections

Although Islamists – with the Muslim Brotherhood in the lead – have played a major role in recent elections elsewhere in the region, they had less impact in the Jordanian elections. This is mainly due to boycotts, but also as a result of internal divisions. The creation of the group known as Zamzam in November 2012 is said to represent a division between a hawkish Brotherhood leadership focusing on Palestinian issues and nurturing close relations with the Palestinian organisation Hamas and more moderate Muslim Brothers who want to focus on Jordanian issues (al-Samadi, 2012). Representatives from Zamzam, however, firmly denied that the group is a breakaway from the Muslim Brotherhood,[14] and a leftist politician supported this view by saying that the Brotherhood would be difficult to split up as long as the hawks control the finances.[15]

Islamic supporters have few alternatives to the Brotherhood: the fundamentalist Salafists have experienced

11 Author interview with a taxi driver, Amman, January 21st 2013.
12 Author interviews with shop employees, Amman, January 21st 2013.
13 Author interview with a youth, Amman January 22nd and 25th 2013.
14 Author interview with a leader of the Zamzam group, January 22nd 2013
15 Author interview with a leader of a leftist party, Amman, January 25th 2013.

political awakening in the region, but the Jordanian branch declined to participate in the elections. Its members are instead putting their efforts into education and religious sermons. The Salafists' involvement as fighters against the regime in the violent Syrian conflict is also obstructing their participation in Jordanian politics (Luck, 2013), with Jordan fearing that the Syrian conflict will spread across its borders. Whatever the case, the Muslim Brotherhood will continue to be an important player in the political process in Jordan. The absence of the Brotherhood from the elections will also decrease the legitimacy of the polls among significant segments of the population.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front has a long history of election boycotts, although the relationship between the Brotherhood and the Jordanian regime was initially almost symbiotic. The Islamists were allowed to fill the vacuum in the Palestinian camps and urban centres when the Palestinian factions were expelled after "Black September" in 1970. Permitted to build an extensive social support base, particularly among Jordanians of Palestinian origin, they secured a solid bloc in the 1989 parliamentary elections. As a protest against a new election law they saw as a step away from democratisation, they decided to boycott the 1997 elections. In order to not withdraw completely from the political process, the Brotherhood decided to participate in the next two elections in 2003 and 2007. However, its relations with the regime deteriorated during this period, because of its links to Hamas, internal divisions at the time and terrorist attacks on two Amman hotels in 2005. The decision to boycott the elections in both 2010 and 2013 was again related to the one-person-one-vote election law, which limits the opposition's ability to have a genuine influence in parliament (Bank, 2011).

One of the leaders of the Islamic Action Front explained that it was a hard decision for the party to boycott the 2013 elections, seeing it is the duty of a political party to participate in elections and understanding that a boycott could be seen as an obstacle to democratic development. The party had high hopes for these elections after pressure from the protest movement had convinced the king to review the election law. When changes to the law did not meet its expectations for real reform, a boycott was unavoidable. The party will, however, continue to work to resolve Jordan's main problems such as the economic situation and corruption. The Muslim Brotherhood also organised its own election monitors to uncover irregularities. In this way it wanted to emphasise that it was still part of the political process despite its boycott decision.[16]

As the largest and best organised political group in Jordan, the Muslim Brothers often overshadow other opposition groups. The Islamic Action Front was not the only group that decided on a boycott. A leftist politician said that politics in Jordan was often seen to have only two actors: the king and his loyal allies, and the Muslim Brotherhood, making other political players invisible:

> If we should describe the situation in Jordan, there are three big groups as I see it. The first is the regime or the king and his aides, the second is the Muslim Brotherhood and the same type of Salafists and religious people. The third group is the liberals, the nationalists, the leftists, and the Jordanian people who believe in a secular country and a modern society. And if you want to describe it in more detail, the first two groups are well organised, but the third one is not. … There are more than 103 groups in the youth movement, the Herak. They are invisible. … So they started to treat the Herak – the protest movement – as if it was the same thing as the Muslim Brotherhood. But in reality it is not.[17]

In an interview with a candidate and his campaign team in the north, a young man present gave a similar description:

> I am part of the Herak (the youth movement), but I am with the good one, not the bad one. The youth movement that I belong to is the one that asks for the facing of the issue of corruption and the amendment of some laws that will help Jordanians, while the other youth movement shrank into themselves and decided not to participate in the elections.[18]

Among the other parties that boycotted the election were the National Progressive Movement, the Popular Unity Party, the Communist Party and most of the youth movement (Herak). The youth movement decided to avoid a situation where the elections split the movement further and left it to each group to decide whether to participate or not. The National Front for Reform also decided to boycott the election. Since many of these groups were small and fragmented, the Muslim Brothers were most visible in the boycott. The youth groups and leftist parties that decided to participate in the elections perhaps had ambitions to fill the void left by the boycotters. But Jordanian observers predicted that they would be too fragmented to fill the vacuum left by the Muslim Brotherhood (Omari, 2013a).

One of the aspiring leftists, Abla abu Olbeh, who was elected to parliament in 2010, decided to run for one of the national seats. She was not elected, and according to another politician she misjudged the situation by believing she was a national figure after serving two years in parliament. He claimed this to be an overestimation of the interest in politics across the country. Even more important was the fact that many of the parties that supported her boycotted the elections.[19]

16 Author interview with a leader of the Islamic Action Front, Amman, January 22nd 2013.
17 Author interview with a leader of a leftist party, Amman, January 25th 2013.
18 Author interview with a candidate and his team, Mafraq, January 19th 2013.
19 Author interview with a leader of a leftist party, Amman, January 25th 2013.

The only Islamist party remaining in the campaign was the moderate Islamic Centrist Party. It claimed to be a democratic party with a well-formulated political programme to address Jordan's challenges and to have regulations to elect its general secretary every two years to avoid anyone holding a monopoly on power. It won three national seats and 14 individual seats, a significant increase from the six seats it won in 2010. It admitted that the Muslim Brotherhood's boycott opened more possibilities for it, but emphasised that it was the Brotherhood's decision to boycott the elections. The Islamic Centrist Party is against the one-person-one-vote election law, but believes in change through participation in the political process.[20]

The newly elected parliamentarians were busy negotiating alliances after the election, because for the first time parliament is supposed to select the prime minister and form a government. Regime supporters see this as a significant step towards democratic reform. Before the opening of the first session of the 17th parliament, six political blocs emerged. These blocs, although not as stable as established political parties, will be central not only for the election of the new prime minister and speaker of parliament, but also for the formation of the 14 parliamentary committees (Neimat, 2013a). However, there are doubts that the formation of a parliamentary government will constitute a real change from governments appointed by the king, since the royal court is heavily involved in the process to select the new prime minister.

The Independent Election Committee

The Independent Election Committee (IEC) was perhaps the overall winner of the 2013 elections. The committee was established as a direct result of protesters' demands for an independent body to oversee the elections to avoid fraud and accusations of election rigging, which have dominated previous polls. The establishment of the IEC was seen by many as a major achievement on the road to democratic reform, made possible by amendments to the constitution (Omari, 2013b). The IEC is responsible for running elections, as well as overseeing that they follow the law. New procedures and regulations were established to make the elections more transparent and to combat election fraud.[21]

Six candidates were arrested for violating Article 63 of the election law by offering services or financial assistance in return for votes. The day before the elections five remained in custody – four in Amman and one in Madaba. A female candidate from Mafraq had been released on bail. The arrests came after joint efforts by the IEC and the security agencies to detect vote buying and other violations of the election law (Neimat, 2013b).

The Muslim Brotherhood was critical of the IEC, claiming that all its members were former government ministers. The IEC failed to include members from the opposition, which then did not see it as an independent committee, but one loyal to the regime. The Brotherhood also claimed that IEC staff were former election staff that used to work for the Ministry of the Interior.[22]

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's criticisms, the elections were regarded as mostly free and fair by both domestic and international observers. This success was attributed to the IEC's improvements to the election system, which made it harder to cheat. The IEC was also praised for its firm stand against attempts to buy votes and collect voters ID cards, although many said that this practice continued and is very hard to control. Election cards and strict ID checks reduced the ability of people to vote more than once. It is more difficult, however, to control the practice of voters' receiving money in return for voting for a particular candidate. This practice has a long tradition in Jordan and was probably also used in the 2013 elections.

Both national and international observers commended the IEC's efforts to improve procedures and administration, but pointed to several areas still needing improvement. Although most election staff seemed to be well trained for their tasks, observers also found that some heads of polling stations lacked sufficient knowledge about election routines and regulations. There was also some criticism of delays in the counting of votes, which the IEC explained to be related to a miscalculation of the extra time needed to count national votes in addition to individual local votes (Ghazal, 2013). However, others suspected that the delay had been deliberately engineered to allow manipulation of the result,[23] a suspicion not confirmed by election observers. The delay might instead have been intended to reduce the number of violent clashes after the announcement of the results.

Some of the observers' criticism had a more fundamental character and addressed the need to review the election law and make the formation of coalitions and political parties easier. Observers also called for stronger measures against vote buying and tribal influence, while also commending the IEC for dealing with those proved to have been involved in such activities (Hazaimeh & Yamin, 2013). Action was taken against election crimes before the election and people were urged to report attempts at voter ID forgery and vote buying, and high-profile arrests before the election made headlines. Three of the candidates accused of election crimes won seats in parliament anyway. The IEC said it was outside its mandate to decide the punishment for these candidates and left the decision to the criminal courts.[24]

20 Author interview with leaders of the Islamic Centrist Party, Amman, January 20th 2013.
21 Author interview with an IEC spokesperson, Amman, January 20th 2013.
22 Author interview with a leader of the Islamic Action Front, Amman, January 22nd 2013.
23 Author interview with a candidate on the "Sons of the Farmers" list, January 24th 2013.
24 Author interview with an IEC spokesperson, Amman, January 20th 2013.

The Muslim Brotherhood organised its own observer team, called Rust, to monitor any irregularities in the elections. Through this the Islamic Action Front wanted to emphasise that its boycott of the elections did not mean that it had withdrawn from the political scene.[25] After the elections the Muslim Brotherhood disputed the voter turnout and reported grave electoral fraud, but has so far failed to produce any evidence (Press TV, 2013).

External factors

The elections in Israel coincided with the elections in Jordan, but raised minimal interest among Jordanian candidates and voters (Reuters, 2013), whereas previously political developments in Israel would be scrutinised for clues about the fate of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. This time the Arabs paid little attention to the elections in Israel. This loss of interest is attributed to the declining chances for a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other worries in the region have also overshadowed the Israeli elections and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the devastating civil war in Syria and the ousting of leaders in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, followed by political turmoil and economic difficulties in these countries. Interviews with candidates and voters in the Jordanian elections confirm this picture.

The Israeli elections and the so-called Israeli-Palestinian peace process were not an issue in the 2013 Jordanian election discourse. This is a rather interesting position since the notion of an "alternative homeland" has frequently loomed over Jordanian politics. This is an Israeli strategy to make Jordan into the Palestinian state, arguing that Jordan already has a majority population of Palestinian descent. One of the national lists calling themselves the "Sons of the Farmers" entered the elections on a programme against the "alternative homeland" and wanted to cancel all citizenships given to Palestinians after Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank in 1988 in order to preserve Jordan's national identity.[26] The list was not elected to parliament and its representatives told me that they were offered money from people close to the authorities to abandon this policy, which they refused. Others called the list racist, suspecting that its members wanted to kick the Palestinians out of Jordan.[27]

A major concern in Jordan currently is the conflict in Syria and the influx of more than 300,000 Syrian refugees, creating pressure on Jordan's scarce resources and strained economy. Although people were talking about the Syrian refugees in terms of a double concern – both their plight and the burden for Jordan – these concerns were absent from the elections and the election campaign. Only a young lawyer made this connection by saying that Jordan should close its borders to more refugees in order to control government expenses and perhaps use the refugee crisis to pressure foreign donors to contribute more generous funds to assist Jordan with the increasing burden of Syrian refugees.[28] With the surprising absence of a foreign policy focus, the election discourse was centred around domestic issues, with a particular emphasis on the economy and service provision.

Women's empowerment

Women's participation in public life, including in parliament, is imperative for Jordan's democratic development. This is partly to raise awareness of and pursue women's rights, but women's participation in political decision-making is also important for establishing a parliament that represents everyone in society. In Jordan, this understanding was acknowledged when a quota for female parliamentarians was introduced in 2003, but ten years later the representation of women is still rather weak.

As we know, the 2013 elections were contested by 1,484 candidates, of whom 661, including 112 women, competed for local seats. Among the 823 candidates on the national lists, 85 were women. Women have never had high chances of winning parliamentary seats in Jordan, particularly not under the one-person-one-vote law. When people only have one vote, they tend not to use it on a woman, since many reject female leadership. For this reason, a quota for six women was introduced in the 2003 elections. The quota has gradually increased, reaching 15 seats in the 2013 elections, with one female representative from each of the 12 governorates and the three Bedouin districts. Analysts were optimistic that a few women might also be able to win a seat outside the quota in these elections, due to positive experiences with female representatives in former parliaments (Husseini, 2013a). In the 2007 and 2010 elections one female candidate made it to parliament outside the quota. In 2013 three women won seats in direct competition with men, raising the number of female representatives to 18.

Mariam Losi, a retired teacher, was one of the female candidates who was elected outside the quota. She not only beat male competitors in her district, but beat them all combined, receiving the largest amount of votes. This is a significant achievement for female parliamentarians. What was her recipe for success? According to one political analyst she won because with her 40 years of teaching experience, she was perceived to be a decent, traditional Jordanian woman living the same life as other Jordanians. Compared to Abla abu Olbeh, who is an experienced leftist politician, it is her traditional Jordanian identity and not her progressive thought that earned Losi her votes.[29]

25 Author interview with a leader of the Islamic Action Front, Amman, January 22nd 2013.
26 Author interview with a candidate on the "Sons of the Farmers" list, January 24th 2013.
27 Author interview with a leader of a leftist party, Amman, January 25th 2013.
28 Author interview with a young lawyer, Amman, January 22nd 2013.
29 Author interview with a leader of a leftist party, Amman, January 25th 2013.

Female candidates face several challenges, one of them being a lack of financial resources to run an election campaign. Jordanian election campaigns are characterised by rising campaign costs. The candidates have to pay fees to register their candidacy and have to secure funds for campaign material and staff. Campaigns usually also include some kind of hospitality towards potential voters, while an additional expense is funds for the common practice of vote buying. Experience has shown that women have less access to financial means for their campaigns than male candidates, a disadvantage that makes them less competitive (al-Attiyat et al., 2005). Social and religious restraints also play an important role in questioning women's ability to play a political and decision-making role in society. For example, a Fafo study in 1998 found that one-third of Jordanian men did not support the giving of decision-making positions to women (Hanssen-Bauer et al., 1998). During the 2013 campaign it was reported that a female candidate was divorced by her husband with the support of his family when she refused to withdraw her candidacy (Malkawi, 2013).

The female candidates who secured a seat in the 17th parliament immediately convened to discuss a strategy to promote women's rights in Jordan and called for co-operation with the women's movement. Many laws still discriminate against women in Jordan and many of the new representatives want to use their position in parliament to fight for women's issues (Husseini, 2013b).

Will the election bring stability?

Jordan has 3.7 million eligible voters. About 2.2 million of them registered for the elections, but in the end a little more than one million voted, representing less than one-third of the voting population.

Although the new parliament was supposed to start a new era of national unity and combine stability with reform, it has not much more legitimacy than the previous one. It is true that the election process contained steps to ensure more credibility and trust in the elections. While previous elections had been undermined by high levels of fraud and cheating, fewer complaints of this kind surfaced after the 2013 elections. In this regard these elections turned out to be a success – one that has been attributed to the IEC, which acted promptly against attempts to collect election ID cards and buy votes. That said, this report has argued that the ethnic[30] division in the country is curbing democratic development and is being utilised by members of the ruling elite to protect their privileges. At the moment the corruption and vote buying that are part of the election process are the main hurdle facing democratic progress, particularly since alienation from politics and politicians seems to be the result. The improved representation of women is a small step in the right direction.

However, insofar as the parliament is based on the views of only one-third of eligible voters, it can hardly be seen as a representative body. As a result we have to expect that the street protests and other forms of opposition to the parliament and government will continue in Jordan. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups, particularly various protest groups organised by the youth, will ensure that protesters will continue to demand democratic reforms, and perhaps most of all a more just election law. They want to see fundamental improvements to the economy that show results in each individual's life, as well as better work opportunities for youth.

Will these protests destabilise Jordan? At the moment there is reason to doubt it. The explanation for this is that Jordanians have learned their lesson from the Arab Spring. Firstly, the discontent with the king seems far weaker than the hatred expressed towards republican leaders in the region. Secondly, Jordanians fear the instability and chaos their neighbours have been through or are still experiencing after their transitions. And although the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan is the strongest and best organised opposition force and seeks to copy its brothers elsewhere by winning power, there are strong forces in Jordan that will do what it takes to avoid this. The tribal areas will continue to protect the king, guarding both the stability this gives the country and the privileges that have benefited them in return for their loyal support. Also, secular protesters dread seeing the Muslim Brotherhood rise to power: the lesson from elsewhere is that this does not bring the kind of democratic development they have worked so hard to achieve. For this reason people in Jordan will keep up the pressure on their leaders, but will want much slower progress and will demand reform and not a revolution.

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30 The word "ethnic" is not used here as the common reference to differences in language or religion, but refers to the differences in origin of East Bankers and Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

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