

## Report

# Deferred reform: A new Jordanian parliament with old faces



## **Summary of the government**

Jordan's new parliament suffers from numerous shortcomings because of the boycott by certain major political forces of its recent election. As a result of the boycott, parliament now consists mostly of former members of parliament and is based on tribal forces who are not experienced in parliamentary politics.

In summer 2012, after failed attempts for reform and change in Jordan through minor amendments to the constitution, and the retention of the 2010 'One man, one vote' law, those who were demanding substantial and not just superficial constitutional reform announced, on 12 July 2012, their boycott of the parliamentary elections scheduled for six months later. The 'one man, one vote' law had put into place cosmetic reform by increasing the number of candidates from 110 to 150 and included national lists that could not exceed twenty-seven candidates against local lists of 123 candidates.

## **Election without principal forces**

Before the beginning of election campaigning for the seventeenth Chamber of Deputies of Jordan, the National Front for Reform – which includes the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF), a few leftist parties, scores of tribal elders, leaders of civil society and other independents and is led by former prime minister Ahmad Obeidat – launched a march on Friday, 30 November 2012 under the slogan 'The Popular uprising for reform'. Its leader alleged that the election law lacked popular legitimacy and all elections conducted on it were false. Salim Al-Fallat from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Reporter for the Supreme Council for reform, in his Friday khutbah (sermon) before the march, demanded a democratic election law that would ensure the creation of a parliament representing the will of Jordanians and would lead to an elected government that would fight the widespread corruption in the country.

The government of Dr Abdullah Ensour had defined its mission as the holding of parliamentary elections and encouraging people to register as voters. Despite this, only 2 272 182 citizens out of the total of 3.7 million eligible voters had registered. That is, only sixty per cent of those eligible to vote had registered.

King Abdullah II intervened, calling on his citizens to register and pay attention to the elections. He published a discussion paper entitled 'Our march towards the building of a renewed democracy' in the Jordanian media on 20 December 2012, at the beginning of the election campaign, where he rejected the idea of boycotting the elections as the National Front for Reform had called for. He, instead, called for dialogue in order to proceed on the road to democratisation. The king stressed adherence to the following principles and practices:

1. Respecting the opinions of others as the basis of a partnership between all;
2. Citizenship was incomplete unless there was accountability;
3. Disagreements should not divide. Dialogue and consensus was a continuous national duty; and
4. Jordanians were all partners in the sacrifices and the gains.

The king published his second discussion paper in the Jordanian media on the 17 January 2013, four weeks after publication of his first paper and five days before the election. The paper was entitled 'Development is our democratic system to serve all Jordanians'. It promised that, after the elections, Jordan would move towards an active parliamentary system so that majority coalitions could be formed in the Chamber of Deputies. According to this paper:

As a first step, we will hasten to change the mechanism to select a prime minister after the next legislative elections according to the following criteria: the next prime minister, who is not required to be a member of the Chamber of deputies, will be appointed in consultation with the majority coalition from the blocs of deputies. If a majority coalition is unclear from the deputy blocs, the process of appointment will be in consultation with all the deputy blocs. The prime minister-designate, as a function of his role, will consult with the deputy blocs to form a new government and agree upon its programme, and it should gain the confidence of the Chamber of Deputies and continue to maintain it.

The King's two papers garnered much debate and attracted several comments in Jordanian newspapers and in other media from regime loyalists. They praised it and supported its contents. The opposition political forces refrained from discussing or commenting on the documents. A refutation against them was indirectly received. On 15 January 2013 the Supreme Council for Reform within the Islamic Movement held a press conference at the headquarters of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Amman in which Hamzeh Mansour, the secretary general of the party, Zaki Bani Arshid, the deputy secretary general and Salem Al-Fallat spoke. Mansour said:

The Constitution stipulates that the regime is parliamentary, monarchical and hereditary, but the Chamber of deputies has no power to independently legislate. The legislative authority is vested in the king, and the parliament consists of the Chamber of deputies and persons appointed by the king, who are not elected by the citizens. One third [in the Chamber] can block legislation. Only the king can convene, postpone or dissolve parliament.

Mansour complained about the inability of the Jordanian people to elect their government and to engage with the general intelligence services in relation to appointments and elections. He stressed that parliamentary elections should be the culmination of reform and not its beginning. But he insisted on the Islamic movement's engagement with other popular movements with the view to monitoring the progress of the electoral process – despite the IAF's boycott of it.

Zaki Bani Arshid said, 'The Muslim Brotherhood will deal with the seventeenth Chamber of deputies the same way in which it deals with other institutions that were created without the will of the people. If the House acts well, the Brotherhood will forward thanks to it and if it does not act well it will request its dissolution.'

The election campaigns have been limited to the opening of the electoral quarters for candidates and widespread posting of their photographs and slogans in the streets of Jordanian towns and villages. These campaigns featured no debates between candidates or any publishing of their political, economic, social and cultural programmes. Sixty-one national lists were formed, some of political parties and others of coalitions of party members and independents. The rest comprised of groups of candidates who were not bound by any link, thought or goal.

The idealistic sounding slogans touched the emotions of voters and tickled their feelings by talking about poverty, unemployment and fighting corruption. These slogans included 'Freedom, justice and equality', vague slogans such as 'A vote rejects silence', 'Together we can', 'Hand in hand so we may realise the promise', 'Ageing is an advanced stage of life which must be respected', 'A woman is the factory of humanity', 'Change', 'Keep things as they are', 'The right to return', and 'Rejection of an alternative homeland'.

Vote-buying increased in the election campaigns and the Independent Elections Commission's contesting of it was too late; sellers and forgers of ballot cards were arrested in Amman and Mafraq a week before the polls; six candidates were jailed by the public prosecutor on charges of bribing voters on 21 January 2013 and the government resorted to instructing ulama to issue fatwas (religious edicts) to encourage citizens to vote. The day before the election, the prime minister declared that the integrity of the election would be absolute. The president of the Independent Elections Commission, Abdul Ilah Khatib, and its spokesperson Hussein Bani Hani repeated the statement. These statements and official statements about integrity and transparency echoed throughout the period of the election campaign and tribalism remained primary driver in the campaign.

The Independent Elections Commission was established under Law No. 11 of 2012. It is an independent body with legal persona and financial and administrative independence

to oversee and manage all the stages of the electoral process for the past and any other elections decided on by the Council of Ministers. The commission is controlled by a board of commissioners which consists of a chairman and four members who are appointed by royal decree for a six-year nonrenewable period. The executive branch is managed by the secretary general, who is appointed by the board and approved by a royal decree. The commission undertakes the necessary procedures for registration of the voters and candidates according to the election law, disseminates voter rolls and candidates' names on the commission's website and any other means of dissemination. It also lays down the rules for campaigns and advertising.

The Jordanian political opposition considers the commission as not independent since it was created by the king and its members were chosen from loyalists. Campaigns to boycott the election continued without interruption throughout the six months preceding the election.

Most of the sixty-one national lists did not give any attention to political reform but agreed on the fight against corruption. Some demanded that the constitution must not be touched and considered the amendments that had been made as sufficient and satisfactory. Some also insisted on upholding the current election law. These lists had been formed on nonpolitical basis, and included persons who had previously not been involved in political activity.

Despite the entrance of nationalist parties such as People's Democratic Party, National Democratic Movement, and Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party into the election fray, only one candidate of these parties succeeded. The number of party members in the new Chamber of Deputies remains very limited.

Elections were held on Wednesday, 23 January 2013. The number of registered voters was 2 272 182. The number of candidates was 1425; 606 of them nominated from local constituencies. There were 819 candidates on sixty-one national lists. The number of women candidates was 191, of whom 105 were from local constituencies and eighty-six were on national lists. The election process was monitored by more than 7 000 observers and by about 1 600 journalists and media personnel.

The number of electoral districts in the kingdom was forty-five and the number of polling stations and counting centres was 4 069. The electoral law limited the number of members of the new chamber to 150, of whom twenty-seven were from the national list, fifteen from the women's quota and 108 individual candidates. The number of actual voters was 1 288 506), constituting 56.69 per cent of those registered for the elections.

Boycotters have contested the validity of this poll. The reality is, if we calculate the number of those who did not register for the elections – some 1.5 million voters – and add the number of those who boycotted the elections from among registered voters – 983 676 voters, the number of boycotters of the elections would be 2 483 676, representing sixty-seven per cent of the total of those eligible to vote.

In any case, most of the election irregularities were procedural and related to attempts to buy votes by some candidates and their supporters, campaigning during the voting process, voting by illiterate people and the attempts of some polling stations to direct voters in favour of particular candidates. There was no official interference in the electoral process as was the case in the 2007 and 2010 elections. The only significant objection was about the vote counting of the national lists. The Independent Elections Commission responded by recounting.

### **New parliament: problem of legitimacy and absence of authority**

The new Chamber of Deputies is not much different, in its nature and composition, from previous chambers. Most faces are known by their performance in previous chambers. Jordanians do not have a good impression of them, which indicates little hope. Their culpability in previous chambers of not holding governments accountable for violations in the legislative and judicial branches and in opening corruption cases raises doubt in the possibility of the new chamber playing a distinguished role. It would be a chamber malleable by any future government.

It is strange that most of those who succeeded in the national lists are the senior leaders. The strongest lists were able to obtain three seats, followed by three lists winning two seats each and sixteen lists that won a single seat for the head of each.

The surprise was that the winning candidate, Dr Rula Al-Farra Al-Hurub, head of the Jordan is Stronger list, resigned on 24 January 2013 to protest the rigging of the elections according to a statement published by TV channel Josat. Al-Hurub accused the Independent Elections Commission of manipulating the results of the national lists, not publishing the results of the ballots one by one and conducting the counting of boxes received from electoral districts in the absence of any monitoring by the candidates and observers.

It is interesting that four candidates who had been imprisoned for buying votes won seats in the elections, sparking a debate about their legal status in the new Chamber of Deputies.

One Jordanian journalist commented on the results: 'Before me are the names of successful candidates. I can extract ten candidates of whom I can confidently say "they

represent me,” and a hundred other candidates who I probably do not even know nor care much about. Forty of them get on my nerves and provoke me. Did we not deserve better than this?’ The journalist continued, ‘the results of self-nomination were not surprising, whether we liked it or not. Most candidates who discharged a politically, socially and behaviourally bad performance in parliament are, unfortunately, the products of a social order that trusts them because they provide services to them.’

Three candidates from the owners of local TV channels succeeded and, for the first time, two blood brothers will enter the Jordanian parliament.

Thirty four candidates from the previous parliament retained their seats and twenty-six candidates from parliaments before that were elected. These comprise forty per cent of the members of the new chamber. Four women won by competing for the first time in the history of the parliament. The number of women in the new chamber is now nineteen. The teachers’ union got three seats. Perhaps the biggest of the Jordanian political parties represented in the new Chamber is the Islamic Centrist Party which won sixteen seats. Its secretary general, Dr Mohammed Al Haj, emphasised in a press conference that the winning party had the right to sixteen seats and to nominate one of its candidates to the presidency of the chamber. It was also its right, he said, to participate in government. He said that coalition members had agreed to nominate him for the post of president of the chamber and that his party is reaching out to cooperate with all political parties, coalitions and candidates. Engineer Marwan Faouri, head of the politburo of the party, objected to the mechanism adopted by the Independent Elections Commission in the calculation of seats from national lists. He said it was unfair for a list that got 14 000 votes to have a single parliamentary seat while the Islamic centrist Party that received 113 698 votes got three seats.

At the tribal level, twenty families and other unions of clans and tribes gained got seventy-two seats in the new parliament. Thirteen candidates from the Bani Hassan tribe won, the Abbad tribe got five seats, the Bani Hamida tribe got four seats, Bani Sakhr got four seats, Howeitat got three seats, the clans of Beersab’ah got seven seats, the clans of Dawayima four seats, the clan of Majali three seats, the clan of Albararashah two seats, the clan of Dahjah two seats, the clan of Abiediyyin two seats, the clan of Almashalikhah two seats, the clan of Bani Laith two seats, and many other clans got one seat each.

Some argue that the desired political change needs time in a conservative and tribal society dominated by clan values, traditions and customs and which lacks a strong middle class, in the same way that it lacks effective political parties which would be a substitute for the current reality of a state party versus the Muslim Brotherhood.

The composition of the new parliament will not help to achieve a qualitative leap in the process of political reform and the desired change. Therefore, many see it as a transitional or temporary parliament.

Is it possible to form a parliament-based government as promised by King Abdullah II with such a parliament? Where is the parliamentary coalition which won the majority of seats? Where are the parliamentary coalitions which can agree on political and economic programmes to face the challenges that impose themselves on the country? Will the Jordanian political crisis continue, finding no solution in the new parliament? The king is able to take the initiative and start a serious national dialogue to achieve the desired political reform. Considering the new parliament as the most important achievement and the conclusion to reform will allow the crisis to continue and the protests and reactions will worsen, calling for political reform and change.

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