

The Jordanian elections – problems unsolved but put off

Peter Seeberg

The article discusses the situation in Jordan after the recent elections. The elections, with a relatively high voter turnout, have not secured internal stability for good and the problems in Jordan remain. The Jordanian economic and social conditions will have to be dealt with by the new government and the political reform process needs to be taken further. The elections have not dealt with a growing dissatisfaction and even criticism of the king himself – something of a novelty in Jordan, where the king are under pressure. Fortunately, seen from the viewpoint of the Jordanian regime, the Jordanian population as well as important external actors supporting Jordan seem to prefer stability to rapid change.

Introduction

The elections to the Jordanian parliament which took place on the 23rd of January 2013 have been met with some skepticism. The well-known Jordan-specialist Curtis R. Ryan asked in a comment just before the elections, if “this is a key turning point for reform in the kingdom, or mere cosmetic change?”, stating that “these elections will not answer these questions entirely” (Ryan, 2013). This seems to be a widely held view – both in Jordan and among scholars and journalists outside the Hashimite Kingdom. On the other hand: The Jordanian elections seem also to generate reasons for a slight optimism, as pointed at by Danya Greenfield from the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council in Washington, who worked as an election observer in Zarga, a conservative university town northeast of Amman (Greenfield, 2013b).

Obviously the elections feed the notion that they changed only little and merely put off the real problems, which King Abdullah and the new government will have to deal with in the coming months and years. These problems have to do with internal issues related to the still far from perfect democratic election system, but not only that. Recently the regime itself has been exposed to hitherto unheard criticism, even directed against King Abdullah himself. The days where the royal leader was considered “untouchable” seem more or less to be gone. The king himself is in public discourse to an increasing degree referred to as part of the problem – a situation which a few years ago would be unthinkable. (Brand, 2013).

The elections and the preliminary results

The preliminary results of the elections, released by the newly-established Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and published by for instance Jordan Times, reveal that the members of the new parliament are not the same as the members of the resigned parliament. According to the IEC around 25 percent of the chairs will be occupied by returning members, which is a much lower figure than anticipated. Interesting novelties are that presumably the proportion of members with Palestinian-Jordanian background has gone up to more than 25 percent – from approximately 15 percent, and that the number of women also has increased.

The reform of the election system stipulates that the quota of women should increase from 12 to 15, so the published list of new parliamentarians show 15 women’s names. But added to that apparently two women were able to jump the quota system by garnering enough votes outside the quota system to win seats. And furthermore two women head national lists and will based on success for their lists get into the new

parliament. This, according to Greenfield, is not yet confirmed, but if it holds, 19 women will be represented in the new parliament.

The national lists represent officially an attempt to strengthen political parties, but in its preliminary mode it doesn't really work to fulfil this ambition. Since the turnout has resulted in a situation where only three lists received votes enough for more than one seat, 23 different lists became represented in the new parliament. The IEC has informed the public that the number of voters who took part in the elections stood at 1,288,043 out of 2,272,182 registered voters and that this resulted in an overall turnout of 56.69 percent. The turnout has according to the IEC been very unevenly distributed – from around 90 percent at Karak's 6th district to around 37,5 percent at Amman's 2nd district with the percentage of male voters slightly higher than that of female voters.

As mentioned by Jordan Times the day after the election King Abdullah described the parliamentary elections as a "success", adding that consultations among blocs in the new House will start to designate a prime minister. This is also a novelty and in the coming days this will be followed closely by the Jordanian public. As Greenfield states "many are skeptical that he will follow through on that pledge" (Greenfield, 2013a). And regardless of if he lives up to the new procedure it seems plausible that the appointment of the new prime minister will only happen after behind the curtains consultations with the king and the powerful Jordanian secret services. The elections have not been flawless – reported incidents of vote-buying, campaigning inside the polling stations etc. contribute to painting a picture of an election system and election practices which are still far from perfect. It is difficult to estimate how much the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF calls for a boycott have affected the elections, but apparently the claims from their side that the result is inflated are not justified. At least domestic monitoring institutions have estimated voter turnouts close to the official figures.

The elections and the regional challenges

Obviously the elections do not solve the economic problems Jordan is facing. Jordan is severely hit by the international financial crisis and is more dependent on economic support from outside than ever. Recently (Nov. 2012) the government has found it necessary to cut fuel subsidies in a move to secure a \$2-billion loan from the IMF. As a result protests erupted in which the slogans even targeted the monarch – a tendency which was unheard of before the wave of Arab Spring-inspired protests hit the kingdom in 2011-12. Further price hikes are announced and certainly this will inspire to renewed protest.

Jordan receives financial help from the GCC-states and according to Jordan Times Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar in the fall of 2012 decided to extend \$5 billion over a five-year period to support different development projects in Jordan. This support, however, comes at a cost. Jordan becomes more inclined to pursue a Gulf-oriented regional political agenda and for the time being this is not without problems. Saudi-Arabia, for instance, wants Jordan to support the Syrian opposition in its fight against the Bashar al-Assad regime and is said to have held back (some of) its promised aid to Jordan for the reluctance of doing so.

At the same time Jordan is under pressure by the presence of several hundred thousand Syrian refugees in the country. UNHCR had 25 January 2013 registered 206,630 Syrian refugees in Jordan, but the Jordanian government claims there are more than 300,000 Syrian refugees in the country. In January 2013 alone more than 30.000 refugees arrived in Jordan. This compares to 16.400 in December, 13.000 in November and 10.000 in October, so the long-term tendency is very obvious, establishing a critical drain on the already problematic Jordanian economy.

The new government will have to deal with these challenges. Maybe the existence of the many different problems has a paradoxical, positive backside, which even might have led to the relatively high voter turnout. Some observers claim that the deeply problematic situation in the large neighbouring state Syria influences the minds of the Jordanians and makes them fear the potential consequences for Jordan. Maybe the king can capitalize on this fear, but obviously only in so far as he to some degree is able to deliver on the many economic and social challenges facing the Jordanian population.

The US also supports the Jordanian regime financially. Barack Obama only recently reentered the international political scene, but probably he will keep on supporting the Jordanian regime, which has an important peace agreement with Israel. The backing from the US will, all things being equal, contribute to stabilize the Hashimite Kingdom. The same is probably the case for the EU. The EU High Representative Catherine Ashton welcomed the elections results and emphasized that they are expressions of an ongoing reform process aiming at improving representation, governance and democratic accountability. She also mentioned the need for future political reforms without specifying what needs to be done. So both the US and the EU support Jordan and its incumbent autocratic leader. Probably none of them will raise demands at the king asking him to carry out dramatic changes in the political system or to change political preferences – be it internally or with respect to regional challenges.

The interests in stability seen from an American as well as a European viewpoint stabilize the regime in Amman. Maybe this reality even can be considered a kind of conservative guarantee that the kingdom in Jordan relatively unchanged will survive

for the coming years. Much depends on the internal development. The elections have not secured internal calm for good but seem to express that the Jordanian population as well as the international actors prefer the recent regime from something they don't know of. The problems, however, remain. The Jordanian economic and social conditions will have to be dealt with and the political reform process needs to be taken further. Fortunately, seen from the viewpoint of king Abdullah, the Jordanian population as well as important external actors supporting Jordan seem to prefer stability to rapid change.

References

- BRAND, L. A. 2013. Identity and the Jordanian elections (Published January 17). *Foreign Policy Middle East Channel* [Online]. Available from: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/17/identity_and_the_jordanian_elections [Accessed January 26 2013].
- GREENFIELD, D. 2013a. Jordan's Electoral Environment and Prospects for Change (Published January). *Atlantic Council* [Online]. Available from: http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/mec130117jordan.pdf [Accessed January 26].
- GREENFIELD, D. 2013b. Optimism after Jordan's election (Published January 25). *Foreign Policy Middle East Channel* [Online]. Available from: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/25/optimism_after_jordan_s_election [Accessed January 26].
- Jordan Times homepage: <http://jordantimes.com/> [Accessed January 26].
- RYAN, C. R. 2013. What to expect from Jordan's elections (Published January 18). *Foreign Policy Middle East Channel* [Online]. Available from: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/18/what_to_expect_from_jordan_s_elections [Accessed January 26].
- UNHCR homepage: www.unhcr.org [Accessed January 26].