



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“Do Jordan’s Elections Matter?”
The George Washington University
Lindner Family Commons, Room 60, 1957 E St, NW
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On Monday, October 4th, The George Washington University hosted a panel entitled “Do Jordan’s Elections Matter?” The event was moderated by **Marc Lynch**, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs and director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington. The panelists were **Curtis Ryan**, Associate Professor of Political Science at Appalachian State University, **Anne Mariel Peters**, Assistant Professor of Government at Wesleyan University, and **Jillian Schwedler**, Associate Professor of Political Science at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The speakers were asked to discuss Jordan’s upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for November 9th. In a few opening remarks, Mark Lynch pointed out that much of the discussion about democracy in the Middle East has been “telescoped” on Egypt. Amidst hopes for reform in Jordan, however, it seems important to ask whether these elections will bring change. What role will Islamist groups play, and what election reforms have been made? More broadly, do the elections matter at all?

Speaking first, Ryan outlined the history of election reform in Jordan, which he asserted has essentially been a 21-year process. In 1989, there were elections for the lower house of parliament following a long hiatus. That year, opposition groups made a big splash: Islamists won 34 out of 80 seats (giving them, for the first time, a democratically-elected speaker in the government), and a number of leftist groups made substantial gains, as well. Since then, **a series of electoral reforms have taken place, including the lifting of martial law and the legalization of political parties.**

In the 1993 elections, Jordanians voted under a “one person, one vote” system for the first time. This change was linked with efforts to gerrymander districts along ethnic dimensions, causing some communities to be underrepresented in government. **In 1997, a comprehensive coalition of opposition groups from a variety of factions rallied together to push for changes in election law, and staged a large boycott of the elections.** This resulted in a conservative, pro-regime parliament that was not representative of Jordanian society – the boycotting groups did make a powerful statement, however.

Another round of elections was scheduled for 2001, but they were delayed for almost two years, due to alleged concerns about security concerns post-9/11. **When the elections finally took place in 2003, the opposition returned to the table to take part – however, opposition groups did not make any major gains,** and continued to protest certain election laws. **Following the 2007 elections, Ryan explained, there were “rampant” charges of electoral rigging,** and it was broadly understood by the opposition and the regime alike that the elections lacked integrity. In 2009, the parliament dissolved.

This year, Ryan continued, there is a new electoral law that addresses some of the opposition’s concerns. It doubles the quota for women’s representation and other groups, for example, but does not meet all of the opposition’s demands. **In this election, more so than in previous ones, identity**

politics are “unavoidable,” according to Ryan. In the view of the regime-oriented reactionaries, Ryan asserted, “reform is a euphemism for Palestinian empowerment,” which is greatly feared.

Speaking next, Peters noted that Jordan is sometimes sarcastically referred to as “Middle East light,” due to its relatively Western and highly-educated upper class and likable monarchs. However, Jordan still has a longstanding authoritarian legacy, in which martial law has been imposed and political parties banned. There are broad allegations of vote rigging in every election, and the parliament is still not substantively representative of the Jordanian population.

In 1998, Peters explained, the Islamic Action Front and a number of NGOs embarked on a campaign for electoral redistricting. Although they faced opposition from the regime, international donors seized on the campaign and called for reform – in some ways, however, those international voices overshadowed domestic efforts to make reforms. During the Bush administration, the U.S. was actively involved in democracy and governance projects that sought to increase legislative transparency, improve rule of law, and provide technical assistance to Jordanian institutions. U.S. aid came with conditions, however – in 2007, for instance, Washington made aid to Jordan conditional on a reform guaranteeing all political candidates access to voter lists for their districts.

When the Obama administration came into office, it made the same rhetorical commitments to support democracy, calling for free and fair elections, as well as increased women’s representation in politics. **In recent years, Peters noted, the number of U.S.-sponsored democracy and governance projects in Jordan has grown. However, the overall funding for those programs has not increased, and new programs are not always replacing old ones. Peters expressed skepticism that the lower levels of democracy and governance funding will actually affect Jordan’s upcoming elections, pointing out that project design is at least as important as the number of dollars spent on a project.** Currently, she contended, many U.S.-funded projects focus on making changes to the “window dressings” of Jordanian institutions, rather than make more substantive changes to the institutional supremacy that the Hashemites have in national politics.

Speaking directly to the overarching question of whether the elections matter, Peters asserted that for elections to matter, changes in parliament must lead to changes in government policy. In Jordan, however, the parliament does not really make policy – **as such, she concluded that the elections really do not matter.**

Finally, Schwedler addressed the history of boycotts in Jordanian elections. In 1997, the election boycott cut across a number of different groups. This year, there has been a great deal of debate – especially within Islamist groups – about whether to participate in the elections. A big concern has to do with election monitoring, and many domestic groups have called for international observers to monitor the elections. Instead, **the National Center for Human Rights will serve as election observers.** Although the organization is a state-created body, it has been critical of the regime’s approach to electoral law and human rights issues in the past.

The Islamic Action Front, Schwedler continued, is boycotting the elections. The IAF is the largest political party in the country, which makes their boycott quite significant. Several other groups plan to boycott, as well – however, the opposition is not united like it was in 1997. **In Schwedler’s view, the elections (and the election boycott by some groups) do matter.** Although the parliament does not generally make substantive policy, it is an important forum through which groups can voice opposition to the regime and its laws. **In her view, the regime wants democratic reform,** as is indicated by the

numerous reforms it has introduced regarding women's rights, torture, and economic reform, among others.

During the question-and-answer session, Lynch pointed out that real electoral reforms would probably empower Islamist and leftist groups. If that were to happen, he asked, wouldn't it jeopardize U.S. interests? After all, the Jordanian monarchy is an important ally for Washington. He also asked about what the U.S. is trying to achieve in Jordan, highlighting the fact that we have been pushing more for human rights issues than election ones.

The panelists responded with a variety of answers. **Ryan called it “alarming” that many of the reformers in parliament have left politics and, in some cases, even left Jordan.** He agreed with Schwedler's analysis that the regime seems to really want reform. Peters argued that Jordan has a lot of potential to become more liberal, but not necessarily more democratic. She also spoke about the significance of U.S. aid to Jordan, asserting that Washington gets “bad PR” by allying with authoritarian regimes, and therefore may find it important to designate aid for reform efforts. In addition, there seems to be a growing recognition in Washington that institutions must grow organically, rather than be designed and implemented by outsiders. **Responding to a question about whether the results of the upcoming elections will change anything about Jordanian politics or policies, Schwedler answered that they will not, and asserted that “we're going to have manipulated, show-elections.”**

In some closing remarks, Lynch pointed out a fundamental dilemma in U.S. democracy promotion efforts: that **Washington has an interest in the Hashemite regime staying in power, and as such, does not want to press for reforms that threaten its rule. However, the U.S. also faces obligations to push for openness and more robust democratic processes.** Although the panelists generally agreed that the upcoming parliamentary elections in Jordan will not bring about significant changes in national politics or policy, their remarks generated an interesting discussion about the ebbs and flows of Jordanian politics, as well as Washington's role in supporting democracy in the country.