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Jordan: Attention Turns to Electoral Law

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Speculation was rife over the last several months that King Abdullah would exercise his constitutional prerogative to delay Jordan's parliamentary elections, due to take place this year. Regional instability, Islamist governing parties in Iraq and Palestine, and discontent over Jordan's rising inflation and subsidy cuts were cited as potential reasons. Major national organizations and figures, however, including the National Center for Human Rights and the Council of Professional Association Presidents, came out strongly against a delay. King Abdullah ended the speculation on March 2, and against the advice of some of his closest advisors, declared that the elections will be held this year.

With elections on the way, Jordan's controversial electoral law is once more under scrutiny. Influential figures and organizations, including Islamic Action Front (IAF) Secretary-General Zaki Bani Irsheid and the Jordan Times, have called on the government to change the "one vote" law used in parliamentary elections since 1993. That system allows each voter one vote regardless of how many parliamentary seats represent the voter's district. The system puts political parties at a disadvantage, as they effectively cannot run slates or lists of candidates in each district because voters only get one choice. The law therefore benefits independent candidates with strong personal or tribal connections to a significant number (but not necessarily a majority) of the district's voters.

Opposition leaders have also called for more equal electoral representation. The number of voters per parliamentary seat varies wildly by district. Democracy Reporting International points out that "at its most extreme, there are nine times as many voters per parliamentary seat in Amman's second district as there are in the sixth district of Karak." The result is that although the two governorates of Amman and Irbid hold 57 percent of Jordan's voting population, they have only 38 percent of the parliamentary seats. It is no coincidence that underrepresented urban governorates have a large population of Palestinian origin, and that overrepresented largely rural governorates are considered mainstays of support for the regime.

The Islamic Action Front, Jordan's strongest and best-organized political party, has suggested replacing the one vote system with a mixed system. Under this proposal, half of the parliamentary

seats would be allocated to national party lists through proportional representation, and the other half to single-member geographic districts. Each voter could cast two votes, one for a national list and the other for a district candidate. The proposal resembles the Palestinian electoral system used in 2006, though whereas Hamas fared disproportionately well in the multi-member geographic districts, polls show that the IAF would perform far better than other parties competing for proportional representation seats. A system with a proportional representation component appeals not only to the IAF, but also to some liberals and leftists, who see a chance to craft parties with national political programs that can ultimately compete with the IAF.

Opposition to overhauling the electoral law comes from the security services, parliamentarians elected from narrow tribal bases under the 2003 law, and some within the palace. Knowing that proportional representation would mean more Islamists in parliament, many within these groups want to see only superficial changes, such as adding a seat or two to the most underrepresented areas or allocating only 10 percent of parliamentary seats to be elected via proportional representation.

Jordan's new political parties law, passed in March, revealed the nature of debate on such issues; parliamentarians proposed harsher conditions for parties than did the government. The new law raised from 50 to 500 the number of members necessary for registering or maintaining party status and raised the minimum number of districts from which parties must draw their members. Existing parties that do not meet these requirements will be disbanded. The law will take effect after this year's parliamentary elections.

A coalition of parties, including the IAF, boycotted discussions with the government on the proposed political party law; there has even been talk of appealing the constitutionality of the law. Although the IAF would have no trouble meeting the new requirements, other parties would, and the IAF has come to realize that its prospects are brighter in a multi-party system. A vigorous IAF-liberal (or leftist) competition might relieve some of the pressure currently directed at the IAF from other Islamist sources. The IAF already receives a disproportionate amount of attention from Jordan's security services; if the IAF becomes the only opposition party, some fear the next step would be to abolish political parties altogether. Alternatively, the forced consolidation of small and weak parties could produce a strong party that contests the IAF's leading position.

Despite the ongoing discussions, few hold out hope for any major changes to the one vote system in the upcoming elections. The most optimistic reformists expect only superficial modifications. The parliament, whose 2007 regular session has already ended, is now in extraordinary session called by the king. Despite the opposition's demands, however, a new electoral law is not on the agenda. As a result, any changes to the electoral law will be issued by the government as a temporary law, without parliamentary debate or vote.

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