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Jordan: Elections without Surprises

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On November 20, Jordanians will head to the polls to elect representatives to the Chamber of Deputies. Comprised of 110 seats spread over forty-five electoral districts, the parliament includes six seats reserved for women, nine for Christians, and three for the Circassian and Chechen minorities. Although opposition parties will participate, they are not expected to win more than 20 percent of the seats. This is largely due to Jordan's electoral law, which adopts the one person, one vote principle--voters cast one vote for one candidate, rather than for a party list, even when the electoral district is allocated more than one seat. Political parties, trade unions, professional syndicates, and civil society institutions in Jordan have long criticized the law, arguing that it stifles political development, fosters tribalism at the expense of modern civil society, and has led to a conservative, traditionalist-dominated Chamber of Deputies since 1993.

For over ten years, politically active Jordanians have been demanding a new electoral law. They have proposed a broad range of changes, including:

- A mixed electoral system, i.e., one person, two votes--the first for a candidate within the electoral district, and the second for a party list;
- Fairer distribution of seats among the electoral districts; the number of constituents per seat varies wildly, with some representing up to seven times as many constituents as others;
- An independent commission to supervise the electoral process in lieu of the Ministry of Interior, which is currently entrusted with this role;
- Electoral monitoring by international and local observers;
- Hearing of appeals to election result by the judicial branch, rather than parliament itself, which has not yet upheld a single appeal;
- Improved electoral procedures to ensure that multiple votes are prevented, dead voters are not counted, etc.;

- Stopping the movement of voter records from district to district and curbing vote buying.

Successive governments have vowed to issue a new electoral law, but then disappointed the Jordanian public by holding the next elections without passing any amendments. Even articles of the electoral law related to the quota of seats for women remain unchanged, despite the fact that they proved highly controversial in the last election, given how few seats were set aside for women and the fact that the quota denied female candidates in the major cities a shot at winning seats.

The thirty-four registered Jordanian political parties (in addition to three currently being established) have chosen to take part in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The political arena these days is seeing active coalition building, platform drafting, and campaign planning, as a result of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) opting to participate. This decision came after heated internal debates within the IAF and the Muslim Brotherhood (which founded the party), due to what the party's leaders describe as an organized government campaign targeting them with arrests, media campaigns, pressure on leaders and members, as well as curbing their social, economic, and educational institutions. The leaders also complained of government intervention and election rigging in municipal elections in July 2007, which the IAF boycotted.

According to several sources, the Islamist movement's decision to take part resulted from the assurances exchanged between Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit and the leaders of the IAF's centrist faction, in a September 19 meeting at al-Bakhit's house. The prime minister reportedly promised to hold clean, transparent elections, while the movement's leaders reassured the government of their intent to take part in but not win the elections, and to keep extremists off their electoral lists. The results of the reported bargain are already observable; the IAF's list for the upcoming elections only has twenty-two candidates, fewer than in the previous elections, and includes no known hawks or members of what is known as the " Hamas line."

The Islamist trend is expected to win a number of seats similar to the 16 percent it holds in the current parliament, but certainly not to cross the 20 percent threshold. Meanwhile, most other opposition parties are not predicted to gain parliamentary representation, except for some of the centrist parties, which are in effect blocs--for example the National Constitutional Party and the Islamic Center Party in the last parliament--of deputies who won seats on their personal reputation or tribal connections, not as members of political parties. Thus it can be said that Jordan is likely to experience elections without surprises in November, leading one observer to predict that the elections will produce a carbon copy of the current parliament--even if some of the names and faces are new.

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