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Jordan's Parliamentary Elections: Do They Make Any Difference?

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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On 10 September 2024, Jordan held parliamentary elections for the twentieth House of Representatives, in which 32.2 per cent of eligible voters – approximately five million voters – cast ballots. In contrast, 29.9 per cent of the electorate voted in the 2020 elections, held during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Islamic Action Front (IAF), political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, topped the results, winning 31 out of 138 seats, or 22.5 per cent of seats.

Background to the Elections

These elections are the first to be held according to the processes stipulated by The Royal Committee to Modernise the Political System. The Committee was established in light of multiple political crisis that swept the country. These included the dissolution of the Jordan Teachers Syndicate,¹ the events surrounding the placement of former crown prince Hamzah under house arrest, in a case that was dubbed *fitna* (sedition) in Jordan,² and the dismissal of MP Osama Al-Ajarmeh.³ In accordance with the Committee's recommendations, a new law for political parties was issued, transferring the task of supervising them from the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs to the Independent Election Commission.⁴ Moreover, a new electoral law for the House of Representatives was enacted, reserving 41 national district parliamentary seats for closed party lists for the first time in Jordan's history, and 97 seats across 18 local districts to the open proportional list.⁵

The recent elections were held in an atmosphere fraught with economic challenges and the repercussions of the Israeli genocide in Gaza.⁶ The violent escalation of Israeli military violations in the West Bank has exacerbated fears that a project to displace its population to Jordan is underway. Furthermore, the government has been widely accused of allowing the establishment of a land bridge to transport goods through Jordan to Israel, as an alternative to the maritime routes threatened by Houthi attacks. Jordan also faces security challenges on the northern and eastern borders with Syria and Iraq from the presence of armed militias supported by Iran, some of which undertake arms and drug smuggling. Meanwhile, other groups seek to infiltrate the Jordanian arena under the pretext of supporting the Palestinian people.

With the outbreak of the genocidal war on Gaza, some leading figures emerged to call for the elections to be postponed, fearing that they would result in a victory for the IAF.⁷ The decision was

1 Laith Al-Junaidi, "Jordan... The Judiciary Supports the Dissolution of the Teachers Syndicate", *Anadolu Agency*, 27/6/2022, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3XokSUT>

2 In addition, former Royal Court Chief Bassem Awadallah and Sharif Hassan bin Zaid were each sentenced to 15 years in prison. See: "Prince Hamzah bin Hussein Case: Jordan to Try Former Royal Court Chief and Sharif Hassan bin Zaid in Military Court", *BBC Arabic*, 21/6/2021, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3XkjdS>

3 Anwar Al-Ziyadat, "Jordan: Former MP Osama Al-Ajarmeh Accused of 'Threatening the King's Life' and 'Conspiracy to Carry Out Terrorist Acts'", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 25/8/2021, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4eo8sCR>

4 "Law No. (7) of 2022: Political Parties Law", Official Gazette, Issue 5784, 14/4/2022, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4gtCVB4>

5 "Law No. (4) of 2022: Election Law for the House of Representatives", Official Gazette, Issue 5782, 7/4/2022 accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3Tuts2M>

6 "Economist to Roya: Poverty Rate in Jordan May Reach 40%", *Roya News*, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4elwRZJ>

7 Ghaith Al-Qudah, "Will the Parliamentary Elections in Jordan Be Postponed?", *Hasna Radio*, 9/1//2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3N7p3iR>



taken to hold them on time⁸ given the amendments the government had introduced to the election law. The threshold for victory in local districts limits the victory of more than one candidate from the same list in districts with three seats or less. The IAF considered itself targeted by this move.⁹

The Electoral Map

The official gradual vision for political modernization is set to facilitate, in its third phase in 2032, the formation of a parliamentary government, where 50 per cent of the seats will be allocated to parties in the twenty-first House of Representatives, and 65 per cent in the twenty-second House.¹⁰

A total of 1,623 candidates competed in the elections, on 197 lists, including 25 party lists and party alliances. While 697 candidates ran for the seats allocated to the national district from 36 out of 38 licensed parties in Jordan, two parties ran only for the 18 local districts allocated by the new election law.¹¹

Besides the IAF, other traditional opposition parties that ran in the elections included the Jordanian Communist Party, and the coalition that represents leftist and nationalist parties such as the Arab Socialist Baath Party, the Popular Democratic Party (Hashd), and the Reform and Renewal Party (Hasad), while the Popular Unity Party competed in the Amman 2 local district.

The parties aligned with the government, most of which were established after the Political Parties Law was issued in 2022, two of them emerged: the National Charter, whose membership includes notables and dignitaries, including former ministers and parliamentarians, businessmen, and senior officials who have served in the state's civil and military institutions. In addition, Iradah is active among the middle class and within the state's bureaucratic apparatus.

The National Islamic Party, which was founded in 2022, also participated in the elections, as a merger of the Islamic Centre Party, which was founded in 2001 after its leaders split from the Muslim Brotherhood, and the National Initiative Party (Zamzam), which was also founded by leaders who withdrew from the Brotherhood in 2016. The National Islamic Party is as a centrist party close to the government.

The "centrist" parties also competed, such as the Democratic Current Alliance, which includes the Civil Democratic Party, founded in 2023, that calls for expanding public freedoms and adopting a social market economy system, as well as the Social Democratic Party, founded in 2016, which includes leftist and liberal figures, especially after its merger with the Development and Modernization Current in 2024, in addition to the Workers' Party, founded in 2013, and the Building & Labour Coalition.

Excluding the IAF, most of the parties are characterized by a lack of party experience, an absence of party identity recognized by the public, lack of experience in managing and organizing election

⁸ Muhammad Abu Rumman, "Disturbing Questions Ahead of Parliamentary Elections in Jordan", *Al-ArabyAl-Jadeed*, 13/8/2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3XUYx2p>

⁹ Lozan Obeidat, "Islamists to *Jordan News*: 'The amendment targets Islamic Action and the government is engineering the upcoming elections'", *Jordan News*, 9/2/2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3XpCvTH>

¹⁰ Article 71 of: "Law No. (4) of 2022".

¹¹ "Islamist Movement Leads Party Seats in Jordanian Parliament," *BBC Arabic*, 11/9/2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3B70f7E>

campaigns, and weak popular support throughout the country, in addition to scarcity of funding. The exceptions to this are the National Charter, Iradah, Progress Party, National Union, and Azem parties, whose electoral campaigns demonstrated their financial capabilities.

Results and Seat Distribution

Ten party lists competing for the general district exceeded the 2.5 percent threshold, equivalent to nearly 40,000 votes, and the lists competing for the national district collectively received 1,378,125 votes, out of 1,638,351 votes at the national and local district levels.

The IAF topped the election results, winning 31 seats, 17 of which were in the national district and 14 in the local districts, representing 22.5 percent of the 138 House seats. National Charter came in second place, winning 21 seats, 4 of which were in the national district and 17 in the local districts, followed by Iradah with 19 seats, 3 of which were in the national district. Meanwhile, Progress Party won 8 seats, 3 of which were in the national district; the Islamic National Party won 7 seats, 3 of which were in the national district; the National Union won 5 seats, 3 of which were in the national district. Meanwhile while the Labour Party won 2 seats in the national district, as did the Blessed Land Party, Building & Labour Coalition, and Azem parties. According to the Independent Election Commission announcement, the parties won 104 of the parliamentary seats in parliament, representing 75 per cent.¹²

Although 104 party-affiliated MPs were declared winners, most parties, besides the IAF, did not announce their candidates for local constituencies during the party's election campaign. Rather, most of them joined local lists on regional and tribal bases without disclosing their party affiliation in their campaigns. Therefore, some believe that classifying 104 MPs as party-affiliated is inaccurate, because they did not win due to their party but rather their social bases, which are often based on regional and tribal affiliations. This prompted the parties to seek out such candidates in the first place.¹³

From this perspective, the IAF shocked observers by obtaining 464,350 votes on the national list; that is, 44.8 per cent of the votes counted – the largest number and proportion of votes the party has ever received. The party's list topped all electoral districts on the national district level, except for the central Bedouin district, where it came in third. This shows that it garnered support from across all governorates of the Kingdom, and not just in the major cities that include camps and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, contrary to propaganda claims. While it received about 184,000 votes in Amman and Zarqa, it obtained its largest share of votes proportionally in the governorates of Tafilah and Ma'an in southern Jordan, taking 55 and 44 per cent, respectively, of the votes in those national districts.

¹² After the results were announced, several parties announced that their share of seats was greater than what the Independent Commission announced. This difference comes from local constituencies, as candidates did not announce their party affiliation to the public or to the Commission at the time of counting the votes. For example, the Charter Party announced that it had won 26 parliamentary seats on local lists, which were in addition to the four seats it won on the national party list. See: "30 Charter Members in the Twentieth House of Representatives," *Al-Dustour*, 13/9/2024, accessed on 16/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/0xsdh>; "Press Conference to Announce the Results of the 2024 Parliamentary Elections," Al-Mamlaka YouTube Channel, 9/11/2024, accessed on 16/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/kovoi>

¹³ Jawad Al-Anani, "The Last Legislative Elections: Conclusions and Lessons," *Ammon News*, 12/9/2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZqeLSc>



Paradoxically, the combined party lists in the local districts garnered a total of 158,907 out of 1,101,967 votes; that is, about 14 per cent – less than the number of votes the party lists received in the elections of 2016, 2003, and 1989.¹⁴ It seems that the vote in the national constituency was a political vote for a religiously and socially conservative society, while the vote in the local districts was influenced by tribal factors,¹⁵ blood ties, marriage, public relations, service provision, and electoral bribery.

In terms of women's representation, 27 women reached the House of Representatives in a historic precedent: 9 more than the 18-seat quota. Of the 9 women who won in free competition for the general district, 4 of them stood for the IAF.

The twentieth House saw the re-election of 52 MPs who served in previous parliaments, 13 of whom won at the national district level. Consequently, there are 86 new MPs, including 6 MPs under the age of 35, who are expected to raise matters concerning their social groups.

Reading the Results

The IAF's lead in the election results can be attributed to its status as the most prominent opposition, due to several factors, most importantly:

1. Punitive votes played a major role in the party's victory. This was a cross-governorate cry of protest, a reaction to political and economic conditions, especially the government's position on Gaza. In a poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies in November 2023, 86 per cent of Jordanians expressed dissatisfaction with the positions of Arab governments on the war.¹⁶ In contrast, the IAF has dealt with the Gaza genocide as if it were a domestic issue in Jordan, taking to the streets to protest from the very outset. Moreover, it helped establish the National Forum to Support the Resistance, and many of its members have been arrested due to the protests in front of the Israeli embassy in Amman.¹⁷ This suggests that voters distinguished between the party that took practical action against the war, and the loyalist parties that participated in superficial protests and virtue signalling to support the government's efforts to counter Israeli aggression.¹⁸
2. The IAF's position on the martyrdom of Maher Al-Jazi on the eve of the elections, after he opened fire on three Israelis at the Karameh crossing between Jordan and the West Bank stood out among the parties. Not only did a delegation from the party visit the wake of Al-Jazi in the Ma'an district of Al-Huseiniyah but the party also published a press release supporting the operation.

¹⁴ "How did Islamists in Jordan Achieve the Best Electoral Result in Their History?", *7iber*, 12/9/2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3zwc8n7>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Public Opinion Poll Results: Israel's Raging War and Aggression on Gaza," Center for Strategic Studies, 26/11/2023, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/47vQYCs>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Most other parties neglected to comment on the incident, which may well have drummed up support for the IAF, especially in Ma'an, where it received 44 per cent of the national district votes, as well in the southern Bedouin district, where the Al-Jazi clan is located.

3. The IAF campaigned on manifesto that included restoring the Teachers Syndicate by nominating the former deputy head of the Syndicate on its list at the national district level. It was during his term that the Syndicate, which he fought to defend, was shut down. He was arrested and made to retire. This is another reason that the party received more votes at the national district level, especially the votes of the roughly 140,000 teachers in the country, with many former syndicate members standing as party candidates in local and national districts.
4. The organizational weakness of the other parties in contrast with the cohesion, committed voter base, and unified leadership of the IAF further puts them at a disadvantage. By far the most organized party, the IAF has diverse charitable, educational, economic, advocacy and social infrastructures.¹⁹ In contrast the historical nationalist and leftist parties, which collectively failed to cross the electoral threshold have seen a huge decline.²⁰

Although the IAF won 22.5 per cent, this still does not match the 1989 elections, when Muslim Brotherhood members won a historic 25 per cent of seats, with the combined opposition winning nearly half of the House of Representatives. This enabled the group to hold the House Speakership for three consecutive terms, in addition to leading important parliamentary committees, and having six ministers in the government. The environment is different in the twentieth council, with the IAF representing the main opposition party in Parliament. In this sense it represents a parliamentary minority, its ability to form significant alliances hindered by its tense relationship with state institutions and the efforts of the loyalist parties to form a majority alliance. It is improbable that the ruling institutions will resort to partnership and power-sharing, as they would rather continue the policy of containment towards the Islamists.

Although the IAF has made serious political inroads, this has occurred in elections for a parliament in a country with a non-parliamentary system. Under the constitution, the party's representatives cannot request a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister or a minister without the support of others in the House, because the constitution requires that the request be signed by no less than a quarter of the members of the House.²¹ Nor can they directly challenge the constitutionality of laws and regulations before the Constitutional Court alone, since they represent less than a quarter of Parliament.²² Meanwhile the constitution allows ten or more representatives to propose laws.²³

¹⁹ Oraib Rantawi, "Jordan's Islamists and the 2024 Elections... They Fought for Gaza, So the Voters Fought for Them," *Al Jazeera Net*, 12/9/2024, accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/47JKeRz>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Article 53 of: *The Jordanian Constitution of 1952 with all amendments thereto*, 10th edition (Amman: 2022), accessed on 14/9/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3ZqlivV>

²² Article 60 of: *The Jordanian Constitution*.

²³ Article 95 of: *The Jordanian Constitution*.



Furthermore, the House of Representatives has a somewhat limited impact on Jordanian political life. On the legislative side, the Senate, the upper house of Parliament, which is an unelected body, has the ability to block legislation, while the government retains the right to draft bills and submit them to the House. After successive constitutional amendments in 2014, 2016, and 2022, which concentrated powers in the hands of the king and weakened the general jurisdiction of the government, the country's constitution has transformed from a parliamentary monarchy, in which the nation is the source of power, to a quasi-absolute monarchy.

Accordingly, the IAF victory will be politically impotent if it continues to be treated as an opposition minority, as happened in the 19th parliament, when its representatives were excluded from leading committees and the executive chambers of Parliament. However, this will also depend on developments in the Gaza genocide, and the extent to which state institutions, especially security institutions, are open to cooperating with the party's leaders and representatives.

Conclusion

The recent parliamentary election results do not pose a threat to the stability of the regime in Jordan, but rather frame the opposition within it. They increase the pressure on international and regional powers to preserve the Kingdom's stability. These elections represent an important development in Jordanian parliamentary life that can be built upon and invested in to bridge the gap between the people and the governing bodies, especially the representative institutions. They may even aid the transition to the next stages of parliamentary roadmap stipulated by the political modernization agenda. After all, the alternative means a loss of confidence in political institutions and street-led demands for change in extremely difficult political and economic circumstances.