Jordan | Freedom House

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 12 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 3 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

King Abdullah II holds broad executive powers. He appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet and may dissolve the bicameral National Assembly at his discretion. Omar al-Razzaz, a former World Bank economist and minister of education, was appointed prime minister in June 2018, replacing Hani Mulki. Mulki resigned in the wake of mass protests over proposed tax increases and hikes in fuel and electricity prices. Constitutional amendments adopted in 2016 empowered the king to make a number of other appointments, including the crown prince and a regent, without a royal decree countersigned by the prime minister or other cabinet ministers.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The king appoints the 65 members of the upper house of the parliament, the Senate. The lower house, the House of Representatives, is elected for four-year terms or until the parliament is dissolved. The 115 seats are filled through races in 23 multimember districts, with 15 seats reserved for the leading women candidates who failed to win district seats. Twelve of the district seats are reserved for religious and ethnic minorities.

In the September 2016 elections for the House of Representatives, the first held under a new electoral system, the opposition Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, participated after boycotting the last two elections. It took 10 seats, and allied groups won several more. However, as in past polls, most seats went to independents—typically tribal figures and businesspeople—who were considered loyal to the monarchy. Vote buying and other forms of manipulation remained a problem.

Elections were held in 2017 for mayors, local and municipal councils, and 12 new governorate councils created under a 2015 decentralization law. However, 15 percent of the governorate council seats are appointed, and the councils have no legislative authority. A quarter of the seats in the Amman municipal council are also appointed by the government. As with the parliamentary elections, independent tribal candidates won the vast majority of seats, while the IAF and its allies won a plurality of the few seats captured by party-based candidates.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 2 / 4

Elections are administered by the Independent Election Commission (IEC), which generally receives positive reviews from international monitors in terms of technical management, though irregularities continue to be reported. The 2016 reform to Jordan’s election law introduced multiple-vote proportional representation for parliamentary elections, replacing a single nontransferable vote system that favored progovernment tribal elites over opposition-oriented political parties. The new law redrew district lines in an attempt to mitigate acute malapportionment that has long placed urban voters at a severe disadvantage. However, even after the changes, rural and tribal voters, the base of support for the regime, remain heavily overrepresented in the parliament. For example, 59,000 eligible voters in the district of Ma’an elect four members of parliament, whereas the first district of Zarqa, which is dominated by Palestinian-origin Jordanian citizens, has over 450,000 voters electing six parliament members.

The legal framework for elections is unstable, with major changes often introduced just a month or two before polling day, causing confusion that can hinder campaigning and voting.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 6 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 2 / 4
Political parties based on ethnicity, race, gender, or religion are banned in Jordan. Parties must receive approval from the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs. Authorities have reportedly intimidated individuals attempting to form political parties. The main opposition party, the IAF, is tolerated, although the offices of its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, were forcibly shuttered in 2016 after the regime prevented it from holding internal elections. The previous year, the government licensed an offshoot group, the Muslim Brotherhood Society, and moved to invalidate the original organization’s legal registration. The decision exacerbated preexisting divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood, which further weakened it politically.

The system favors tribally affiliated independents over political parties with specific ideologies and platforms, as does the patronage-based political culture. In the 2016 elections, only 215 of 1,252 candidates ran for specific parties, according to the IEC.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4

The Islamist opposition holds only about 12 percent of the lower house, and the political system—including the overrepresentation of rural voters—limits the ability of any party-based opposition to make significant gains. Moreover, the constitutional authority of the monarchy means that no opposition force can win control of the executive branch by democratic means alone.

B3. Are the people’s political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

While voters and candidates are generally free from overt threats or violence, they remain heavily influenced by tribal affiliations and the state-sponsored patronage networks that accompany them. Citizens’ political participation is also constrained by the fact that many important positions are appointed rather than elected.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

Women have equal political rights, and female candidates have won some seats beyond the legal quotas set for the parliament and subnational councils, but cultural prejudices remain an obstacle to women’s full participation in practice. Five women won parliamentary seats outside the quota system in 2016, and four won governorate council off-quota seats beyond the reserved positions in 2017. Women performed better at the municipal and local levels, but none won mayoral posts.

Nine seats in the House of Representatives are reserved for Christians and three for Circassians and Chechens together. Christians are not permitted to contest nonreserved seats. Citizens of Palestinian origin, who tend to live in urban areas, make up a majority of the overall population but remain underrepresented in the political system.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 3 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

The king dominates policymaking and the legislative process. The appointed government submits all draft legislation to the House of Representatives, which may approve, reject, or amend bills, though they require approval from the appointed Senate and the king. Groups of 10 or more lawmakers can propose legislation, but the House must then refer it to the government before it can return to the chamber as a draft law. Among other royal prerogatives, the king unilaterally appoints the heads of the armed forces, the intelligence service, and the gendarmerie.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

The government has undertaken some efforts to combat widespread corruption, and the Integrity and Anticorruption Commission is tasked with investigating allegations. However, successful prosecutions—particularly of high-ranking officials—remain rare. Anticorruption efforts are undermined by a lack of genuinely independent enforcement institutions and restrictions on investigative journalism and civil society activism.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4
Laws governing access to government information are vague, lack procedural detail, and contain sweeping exceptions. Officials are not required to make public declarations of their income and assets. The National Assembly does not exercise effective or independent oversight of the government’s budget proposals.

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D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 7 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

Jordan’s media laws are restrictive, vague, and arbitrarily enforced. Various statutes penalize defamation, criticism of the king or state institutions, harming Jordan’s relations with foreign states, blasphemy, and any content considered to lack objectivity. Government gag orders and informal instructions to media outlets regarding news coverage are common. News websites face onerous registration requirements that, if not met, can serve as a justification for blocking. Journalists rarely face serious violence or significant jail time for their work, but they often practice self-censorship. In January 2018, authorities arrested journalists Shadi al-Zinati and Omar Sabra al-Mahrama of the news site Jfranews, over the publication of an article accusing the finance minister of tax evasion. They were released on bail after one day in custody.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

Islam is the state religion. The government monitors sermons at mosques for political, sectarian, or extremist content and has begun issuing recommended texts and themes. Muslim clerics require government authorization to preach or issue religious guidance. Many Christian groups are recognized as religious denominations or associations and can worship freely, though they cannot proselytize among Muslims. While converts from Islam are not prosecuted for apostasy, they face bureaucratic obstacles and harassment in practice. Unrecognized religious groups are allowed to practice their faiths but suffer from a number of disadvantages stemming from their lack of legal status. Atheists and agnostics are required to list a religious affiliation on government documents.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Intelligence services reportedly monitor academic events and campus life, and administrators work with state officials to scrutinize scholarly material for politically sensitive content.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 2 / 4

Open discussion of topics such as politics, the monarchy, religious affairs, and security issues is inhibited by the threat of punishment under the various laws governing expression. The telecommunications law requires companies to enable the tracking of private communications upon the issuance of a court order, and authorities are allowed to order surveillance of people suspected of terrorism. Many Jordanians hold a long-standing belief that government agents routinely listen to their phone calls and monitor their online activities.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 3 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Jordanian law limits free assembly. Authorities require prior notification for any demonstration or event and have broad discretion to disperse public gatherings. Sometimes, the Interior Ministry cancels planned public events without advance notice or explanation. Violations of the law on assembly can draw fines and jail time. Security forces have in the past engaged in violent confrontations with protesters.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 1 / 4

While many local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are able to operate in the country, there are significant restrictions on civil society. The Ministry of Social Development has the authority to deny registration and requests for foreign funding, and can disband organizations it finds objectionable. The ministry has broad supervisory powers over NGO operations and activities, and board members must be vetted by state security officials. In practice, these regulations are applied in an opaque and arbitrary manner.
In June 2018, Nidal Mansour, the director of the press freedom organization Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, was convicted on charges related to the organization’s financial management and for not adhering to the group’s stated goals and objectives. In November, an appeals court reversed the conviction and cleared Mansour of all charges.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Workers have the right to form unions, but only in 17 designated industries, and the groups must obtain government approval and join the country’s semiofficial union federation. The right to strike is limited by requirements for advance notice and mediation, and participants in an illegal strike are subject to dismissal.

F. RULE OF LAW: 7 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 2 / 4

The judiciary’s independence is limited. Under the 2016 constitutional amendments, the king unilaterally appoints the entire Constitutional Court and the chair of the Judicial Council, which nominates judges for the civil court system and is made up of senior members of the judiciary. Judges of both the civil and the Sharia (Islamic law) courts—which handle personal status matters for Muslims—are formally appointed by royal decree.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Police can hold suspects for up to six months without filing formal charges, and governors are empowered to impose administrative detention for up to one year. In practice, the authorities often ignore procedural safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention, holding individuals incommunicado or beyond the legal time limits. Criminal defendants generally lack access to counsel before trial, impairing their ability to mount a defense. Despite a constitutional prohibition, courts allegedly accept confessions extracted under torture.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

Torture and other mistreatment in custody remain common and rarely draw serious penalties. Prison conditions are generally poor, and inmates reportedly suffer from beatings and other abuse by guards.

Terrorist attacks continued to threaten security in 2018. In August, a bomb attack on a police car, carried out by perpetrators who adhered to the ideology of the Islamic State (IS) militant group, killed one officer and injured six others. The subsequent raid to capture the suspects in the attack led to the deaths of four security officers and three suspected militants, in addition to 20 civilian injuries.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

Women face discrimination in law and in practice. For example, women’s testimony is not equal to men’s in Sharia courts, and certain social benefits favor men over women. Jordanians of Palestinian origin are often excluded from jobs in the public sector and security forces, which are dominated by East Bank tribes. Discrimination against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people is also prevalent and includes the threat of violence, though consensual same-sex sexual activity is not specifically prohibited by law. The authorities have denied registration to NGOs that support the rights of LGBT people.

According to the United Nations, there were over 760,000 registered refugees in Jordan as of December 2018, including more than 670,000 from Syria, though the government has reported that the true figure may be double that number. Jordan does not accept refugees and asylum seekers for settlement but typically allows those in the country to remain while UN agencies seek more permanent solutions. Most refugees lack access to work permits and instead work informally. In March, authorities started to provide refugees living outside of camps without permits legal status, which reduced their risk of arrest and offered more employment and education opportunities. However, in January, the government decided to rescind the eligibility for subsidized health care for refugees living outside of camps.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 8 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4
Jordanians generally enjoy freedom of domestic movement and international travel. Refugees, however, face impediments to their rights to travel and change employers, and there have been reports of employers confiscating the passports of foreign migrant workers. Women cannot pass citizenship to their children, making it difficult for people with noncitizen fathers to access jobs, education, and health care without a special identity card that is often difficult to obtain.

In October 2018, Syria and Jordan agreed to reopen a border crossing in Nassib that had been closed for three years. Before its closure, the crossing facilitated billions of dollars in trade between the two countries.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

The legal framework generally supports property rights for citizens, but women do not have equal access to property under Sharia-based inheritance rules. Private business activity is hampered by obstacles such as corruption and the abuse of political or other connections.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

Personal social freedoms are limited by the country’s conservative culture and laws. The government does not recognize marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. Matters such as marriage and divorce are handled by religious courts, which place women and converts from Islam at a disadvantage and restrict some interfaith marriages.

Modest legal improvements have been enacted in recent years. In 2017, the parliament adopted legislation to better regulate the processing of domestic violence complaints. Other laws enacted in 2017 abolished a penal code provision that allowed rapists to avoid punishment by marrying their victims. However, reduced sentences are still possible for those who murder a spouse caught committing adultery, and spousal rape is not a crime.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

There are approximately 1.4 million migrant workers in Jordan, of whom about a million have no work permit, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation. Labor rights organizations have raised concerns about poor working conditions, forced labor, and sexual abuse in Qualifying Industrial Zones, where mostly female and foreign factory workers process goods for export. The legal minimum wage remains below the poverty level and excludes large classes of workers. Rules governing matters such as working hours and safety standards are not well enforced.