



Freedom in the World - Jordan (2010)

Capital:
Amman

Population:
5,915,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Status Change Explanation

Jordan's political rights rating declined from 4 to 5 and its status from Partly Free to Not Free due to King Abdullah's dismissal of the parliament and his announcement that elections would not be held until the end of 2010, as well as the security forces' increased influence over political life.

Overview

The king dissolved the parliament in November, about two years into its four-year term, and announced that new elections would not be held until late 2010; ordinarily, elections would be held within four months of the parliament's dissolution. The delay would allow the government to rule by decree for at least a year, and it was expected to enact a series of unpopular market liberalization measures as well as a new election law in the parliament's absence.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, known as Transjordan until 1950, was established as a League of Nations mandate under British control in 1921 and won full independence in 1946. The turbulent 46-year reign of King Hussein, which began in 1953, featured a massive influx of Palestinian refugees, the loss of the West Bank to Israel in 1967, and numerous assassinations and coup attempts. Nevertheless, with political and civil liberties tightly restricted, Hussein proved adept at co-opting his political opponents. After economic austerity measures in the late 1980s sparked rioting and pressure for greater freedom, the government progressively eased restrictions on civil liberties, though the reform process suffered some reversals in the mid-1990s.

By the time Crown Prince Abdullah succeeded his father as king in 1999, the kingdom faced severe economic problems. The expected "peace dividend" from Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel had failed to improve conditions for most of the population, and Abdullah began major economic reforms. Meanwhile, additional restrictions on the media, public protests, and civil society activity were imposed after groups including Islamists, leftists, and Jordanians of Palestinian descent staged demonstrations to demand the annulment of the 1994 treaty and express support for the Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) against Israel that began in 2000.

In 2001, Abdullah dissolved the parliament, postponed elections scheduled for November, and replaced elected municipal councils with state-appointed local committees. He ruled by decree for over two years, issuing more than 200 “temporary laws” that weakened due process and restricted freedoms of expression and assembly.

The king allowed reasonably free and transparent—though not fair—parliamentary and municipal elections in 2003. In an informal understanding with the palace, dissident leftist and Islamist groups gained limited freedom of expression and political participation, and agreed to curtail their agitation against Jordan’s pro-U.S. foreign policy.

The relationship between the government and political parties remained strained, however. In 2007, security forces arrested nine members of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the main opposition party and the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, for “threatening national security” ahead of that year’s municipal and parliamentary elections. Only a handful of IAF candidates won seats in the polls, which were marred by irregularities. A new political party law in 2008 required parties to have broader membership bases, and the number of registered parties consequently fell to 14, from 37.

The king appointed a new government in February 2009, then unexpectedly dismissed the parliament in November. While new elections would ordinarily be held within four months, the government announced that the polls would be postponed until late 2010, allowing it to rule by decree for at least a year. The parliament had failed to pass government-backed economic reforms in August, and the cabinet was expected to enact the legislation in the legislature’s absence. There was also speculation that the government would issue a new election law in the coming year, potentially affecting the composition of any future parliament.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Jordan is not an electoral democracy. King Abdullah II holds broad executive powers, appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet, and may dissolve the National Assembly at his discretion. The 110-seat lower house of the National Assembly, the Chamber of Deputies, is elected through universal adult suffrage. It may approve, reject, or amend legislation proposed by the cabinet, but its ability to initiate legislation is limited. It cannot enact laws without the assent of the 55-seat upper house, the Senate, whose members are appointed by the king. Members of both houses serve four-year terms. Regional governors are appointed by the central government.

The electoral system is heavily skewed toward the monarchy’s traditional base of support. Voters in the 45 multiseat parliamentary districts each choose a single candidate, which favors tribal and family ties over political and ideological affiliations. In addition, rural districts with populations of Transjordanian origin are overrepresented relative to urban districts, where most Jordanians of Palestinian

descent reside. Activists have repeatedly called for a new electoral law based on proportional representation. A 2007 law cleared the way for that year's municipal elections, in which all mayors and council members were elected, though an exception for Amman meant that half of the city's council members would continue to be appointed.

The authorities have made some progress in combating persistent official corruption in recent years, and an independent Anticorruption Commission was established in 2007. Among other high-profile corruption cases in 2009, the minister of public works was accused of profiting from a housing project, and a lawmaker's brother allegedly used a parliamentary car to smuggle drugs. Jordan was ranked 49 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is restricted, and those who violate redlines regarding the royal family and certain societal taboos face arrest, causing widespread self-censorship. As in previous years, private citizens were arrested in 2009 for criticizing the king. Laith Shbailat, a prominent Islamist opposition leader, was beaten by unidentified assailants after he gave a televised interview accusing the government of corruption and calling for abrogation of the peace treaty with Israel. Another member of the Muslim Brotherhood was arrested for allegedly plotting to set up a "militant faction." The security forces, whose leadership generally excludes Jordanians of Palestinian descent, continue to exercise significant influence over Jordanian political life by limiting citizens' freedoms of speech and assembly.

While prison was abolished as a penalty for press offenses in 2007, journalists can still be jailed under the penal code. A study released in 2009 by the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists found that 43 percent of journalists admitted receiving some form of "incentive" from the government, while 94 percent said they practiced self-censorship. In April, a newspaper columnist was acquitted of insulting the parliament in an article he had posted online. However, the parliament issued rules that month to limit journalists' physical access to the parliament building and offices, and to allow interviews of lawmakers only in the presence of a media officer. The authorities are also sensitive to criticism from foreign media. Security forces attacked a camera crew with the Qatar-based satellite television station Al-Jazeera during January demonstrations against the Israeli offensive in Gaza. And in July, the government closed the local offices of two Iranian state-funded television channels, the Arabic-language Al-Alam and the English-language Press TV.

Most broadcast news outlets remain under state control, but satellite dishes give residents access to foreign media. While there are dozens of private newspapers and magazines, the government has broad powers to close them. Authorities are routinely tipped off about potentially offensive articles by informers at printing presses, and editors frequently come under pressure to remove such material. Intelligence agents often call journalists with warnings about their writing. While

the government denies restricting access to the internet, websites airing critical views have been blocked in the past, and authors of critical posts have faced intimidation or arrest.

Islam is the state religion. Christians and Jews are recognized as religious minorities and can worship freely, and while Baha'is and Druze are not officially recognized, they are allowed to practice their faiths. The government appoints Islamic clergy and monitors sermons at mosques, where political activity is banned. Preachers must obtain written government permission to lead services or teach the Koran. Only state-appointed councils may issue religious edicts, or fatwas, and it is illegal to criticize these rulings.

Academic freedom is generally respected, and Jordanians openly discuss political and societal developments. However, certain limits remain in place, and there have been reports of a heavy intelligence presence on some university campuses.

Freedom of assembly is heavily restricted. Provincial governors often deny permission to hold demonstrations, particularly when organizers seek to criticize Jordanian-Israeli relations. Police violently dispersed demonstrations protesting Israel's offensive in Gaza in January, as well as a protest against food imports from Israel in July. The Amman governorate also prevented an Islamist demonstration protesting clashes at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque in September.

Freedom of association is limited. While many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are able to operate without running afoul of the authorities, the government is considering new legislation that would severely limit their independence. Under the measure, the government would be able to supervise NGO budgets, reject foreign funding, and veto individual programs planned by the organizations. NGOs would be barred from engaging in "religious or sectarian" activities, and would have to open membership to anyone fulfilling the criteria in their bylaws. While the legislation had yet to be approved at the end of 2009, the government currently puts occasional pressure on NGOs' activities.

Workers have the right to bargain collectively but must receive government permission to strike. More than 30 percent of the workforce is organized into 17 unions. Foreign workers do not enjoy the same legal protections as Jordanians, and labor rights organizations have raised concerns about poor working conditions in so-called Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs), where mostly female and foreign factory workers process goods for export. In 2009, a foreign investor who owned a factory in a QIZ left the country without paying any of the employees, and the government was unable to offer any assistance to the affected workers.

The judiciary is subject to executive influence through the Justice Ministry and the Higher Judiciary Council, most of whose members are appointed by the king. While most trials in civilian courts are open and procedurally sound, the State Security Court (SSC) may close its proceedings to the public. A 2001 decree allows the

prime minister to refer any case to the SSC and denies the right of appeal to people convicted of misdemeanors by the SSC.

Under the constitution, suspects may be detained for up to 48 hours without a warrant and up to 10 days without formal charges being filed; courts routinely grant prosecutors 15-day extensions of this deadline. Even these protections are denied to suspects referred to the SSC, who are often held in lengthy pretrial detention and refused access to legal counsel until just before trial. Provincial governors can also order indefinite administrative detention, and about a fifth of all Jordanian prisoners are held under this provision; there are approximately 10,000 new cases of administrative detention each year. The UN special rapporteur on torture found in 2006 that "torture is systematically practiced" by the General Intelligence Department (GID), which interrogates suspects to obtain confessions in SSC cases. There is no independent complaint or monitoring mechanism for abuse in custody.

Prison conditions are poor, and inmates are reportedly subject to severe beatings and other abuse by guards. Prison staff allegedly force prisoners to take castor oil to prevent the bodily concealment of contraband. Islamist prisoners on a hunger strike in August 2009 were denied water; Islamists are typically isolated in small groups from the rest of the prison population. In one week in November, two Jordanians died after police beatings.

Freedom of movement and travel is generally respected. The size of the Iraqi refugee community in Jordan has decreased significantly in recent years, and Iraqis in Jordan receive better treatment than in other host countries. However, their entry into Jordan is strictly limited, and those who enter the country are subject to heavy restrictions, including the right to work or to use Jordanian public services.

Women enjoy equal political rights but face legal discrimination in matters involving inheritance, divorce, and child custody, which fall under the jurisdiction of Sharia (Islamic law) courts. Government pensions and social security benefits also favor men. Although women constitute only about 14 percent of the workforce, the government has made efforts to increase the number of women in the civil service. Women are guaranteed a quota of six seats in the lower house of parliament and, under the 2007 municipalities law, 20 percent of the seats in municipal councils. Article 98 of the penal code allows for lenient treatment of those who commit a crime in a "state of fit or fury" resulting from an unlawful or dangerous act on the part of the victim. In practice, this provision is often applied to benefit men who commit "honor crimes" against women. At least 14 such crimes were reported in the first eight months of 2009.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*