

Jordan's election to yield parliament of conservative incumbents

Jamal J. Halaby

Amman

Jordanians head to the polls September 20th to elect a new parliament, a vote lauded as a step towards overhauling the system of power-sharing and giving the people a wider participation in decision-making.

Analysts predict the election will produce only a handful of candidates elected to parliament for the first time. The bulk, according to surveys, is expected to be conservative politicians from previous parliaments winning re-election. At least 254 of 1,252 candidates vying for parliament's 130 seats are former lawmakers.

Critics argue that the expected victory of conservatives is due in part to a confusing electoral law, weak and fragmented political parties and voter apathy, which will effectively allow tribal identities and individual personalities – rather than ideologies or political platforms – to dominate the polls.

Perhaps the most significant development would be Islamists affiliated with the Islamic Action Front (IAF) – the political arm of the splintered fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood – staging a comeback and winning the largest bloc in parliament, Jordanian electoral officials admit in private.

The elections are seen as a barometer of popular sentiment, frustrated by a domestic economic crunch and civil wars and militant violence in neighbouring countries, but that will really have a little effect because in Jordan gerrymandering ensures that tribal East Bank Bedouins – who form the bedrock of support for the ruling Hashemite dynasty – get the lion's share of seats in parliament.

At most, IAF will win 33 seats, about 25% of the elected Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of parliament, IAF leader Abdul Ma'jeed Thneibat said.

"This is an accurate estimate based on real data from a hive of strategists and statisticians calculating campaigns and polls," said Thneibat, who said his group fielded 70 candidates on 20 lists in 15 of Jordan's 23 electoral districts.

Officials with the independent Electoral Commission, insisting on anonymity, said their estimate is that IAF may end up with 10-15 seats in parliament. Though the number is much less than IAF's projections, it is far from the nearest rivals among right-wing, nationalist and leftist parties who are likely to muster only a few seats.

Local authorities sought to stack the ballot against IAF by reserving a disproportionate number of seats for groups such as Christians, Circassians and Chechens, as well as women but the IAF outwitted them by reaching out to the minorities. There are at least five Christians on IAF's list.

The bulk of elected members is expected to be conservative politicians from previous parliaments winning re-election.

Still, there may be some benefits to getting the Islamists on board. More poor, unemployed and frustrated young Jordanians are leaning towards the Islamic State (ISIS) militants. Some Jordanian jihadists who fought alongside the group in Syria and Iraq are returning home. In 2016, there were at least three attacks on Jordanian security blamed on ISIS. Jordanian courts say there are more than 588 militants, mostly young Jordanians on trial for ISIS-related conspiracies.

And, despite foreign aid to assist cash-strapped Jordan to deal with an influx of more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees and tens of thousands of others from Iraq, Libya and Yemen, Jordan's moribund economy is sliding towards bankruptcy. Public debt has climbed from 82% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014 to 94% in 2016.



Turbulence ahead? Supporters of the Islamic Front Action party during an election rally, in Amman, on September 2nd.

"The presence of Islamists in parliament will bode well with any future government plans to sell painful cuts in subsidies, if backed by a government with broad representation," said Abdul-Kareem Dughmi, a liberal ex-lawmaker.

Jordan clamped down on the Muslim Brotherhood after its local leaders adopted fiery anti-government positions, taking advantage of the victory of the mother group in Egypt. The Jordanian crackdown, which continued through 2016, resulted in splitting the Brotherhood into two groups: Hawks who were eventually banned and doves who were licensed and given the Brotherhood's name.

IAF, Jordan's largest and most organised opposition party, stayed away from the two latest elections in protest of a government-drafted electoral law it claimed reduced votes in its favour. The law has since been changed at least five times.

Elections expert Walid Hosni said the law's latest version was no better, however.

"The new law hinders a sufficient political and representational diversity to voters, which means the outcome will be a docile parliament eyed by voters with suspicion and sometimes mockery," Hosni said.

Hosni also blamed the country's 50 licensed political parties, which have consistently been very weak

and unpopular due to both structural obstacles and cultural attitudes, for the tumult. Of the 1,252 candidates contesting the elections, only 222 are affiliated with IAF and other political parties.

It would seem that the election law's requirement that candidates run on lists could boost political party participation but tribal identities and individual personalities are likely to dominate the elections rather than ideologies or political platforms.

Hosni said the election would employ an "open list proportional representation system" for the first time. However, the "complexity of this law may adversely impact voter turnout and significant amounts of ballots could potentially be invalidated because they are completed incorrectly", he said.

There are 4.2 million eligible voters, of whom 1.7 million are expected to cast a ballot. Elections officials said apathy may keep many away, especially since a vast majority of the electorate is preoccupied by bread-and-butter issues, overwhelmed by refugees and anxious of mounting violence around Jordan, more than the patriotic slogans of candidates pledging to defend Jerusalem's al Aqsa mosque.

Voter turnout for this election is a concern. When the Washington-based International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted its latest poll on Jordanian public opinion in

April, only 38% of respondents said that they were likely to vote in the elections, down from 47% in May 2015.

The result is in line with an August poll by Jordan's Phenix Centre for Economic and Informatics Studies, in which 38.9% of respondents stated an intent to vote. When the Phenix Centre asked those not intending to vote why they were abstaining, a plurality – 30.5% – cited dissatisfaction with the previous parliament's performance. Only 5% of IRI's poll respondents said the outgoing parliament had accomplished anything commendable.

Jordan has said the elections were a step towards further democracy, in which the monarchy would start handing over some of its absolute powers to parliament. The government said, as a first step, it hoped that the polls would lead to electing a prime minister from a parliamentary majority, ending the monopoly of Jordanian kings to appoint premiers.

For Hosni, the upcoming parliament may not lead to the election of a prime minister.

"The small and scattered blocs in parliament with no political platforms are likely to resort to the king to help out by picking one for them," he said.

Jamal J. Halaby, based in Jordan, is Levant editor for The Arab Weekly.

Will Jordan's elections turn out to be just another Groundhog Day?

Viewpoint



Mamoon Alabbasi

Jordanians are preparing for parliamentary elections with a mixed sense of expectations.

On the face of it, many aspects of an election involving 230 lists competing for the 130-seat lower house appear to be positive. The new bloc voting system, which replaced the one-person, one-vote method that had been used since 1993, is touted as fairer and more diverse.

Authorities have vowed that this election would not be marred by fraudulent incidents, as was the case in some previous polls.

Female candidates are more optimistic about their chances in securing parliamentary seats beyond the quota system. Women make up about 52% of the more

than 4 million people registered to vote. Out of 1,293 candidates, 257 are women.

A new youth movement called Shaghaf was set up to address concerns of young voters.

Social, as well as traditional, media are abuzz with election campaigns and discussions. The streets are filled with pictures of candidates.

There are, however, many people who are not optimistic that the elections will produce anything other than more of the same, if not more trouble.

This is mainly focused on three factors: The view that the political system will still be held hostage to tribal alliances, corruption and lack of accountability; the fact that, regardless of the election outcome, key decisions will be determined by the monarchy; and the power struggle between the government and the Islamists could blow out of control.

The Islamists, predominately represented by the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm, Islamic Action Front (IAF), have decided to take part in full force, reversing a decision to boycott the elections.

The IAF, campaigning to attract voters beyond its traditional Islamist base, is hoping to secure 20% of the overall seats. It formed the non-partisan National Alliance for Reform (NAR), whose lists include Arab Christians, Circassians, nationalists and other non-Islamists.

The government, which has officially banned the Muslim Brotherhood and shut down many of the group's offices, has not disallowed the participation of its members via NAR.

By allowing NAR to take part, the government is hoping to give the elections legitimacy as it has succeeded in avoiding mass boycotts of the polls, which could lead to instability in the streets. It wants Brotherhood members to be part of the opposition but not be strong enough to dominate it or come to power.

The government's decision to ban the Muslim Brotherhood and recognise its splinter group, the Muslim Brotherhood Society (MBS), was likely taken to pressure the Islamists to return to the political process instead of casting doubt on it.

It also helps the government

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to have a diluted Islamist voice, now divided into four parties: the Brotherhood's IAF/NAR, MBS, the Zamzam Initiative and al-Wasat but the gamble could backfire if the Muslim Brotherhood wins more seats than the government envisages.

The stakes are high for the Brotherhood, too. A sweeping victory would put it on a collision course with the government, this time with a sharper axe to grind.

The Muslim Brotherhood would face a new task post-elections: dealing with non-Islamists partners. Forming alliances ahead of polls is not the same as working with them after the vote, where the differences would be tested over a longer period of time.

It also remains to be seen how genuine the Muslim Brotherhood's reform bid is. If it goes too far, it may stray from its original base.

Yet the government-Muslim Brotherhood power struggle is not a concern to many Jordanians who have given up in seeing any real change come to their political system.

To them, the election is a part of just another Groundhog Day.

A sweeping victory would put the Brotherhood on a collision course with the government.