

Policy Paper

Familiar Slogans, a Skeptical Public: The 2016 Parliamentary Elections

Author:

Rana F. Sweis

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by Rana Sweis

Introduction

As candidates campaigned for the 2016 parliamentary elections, they faced a Jordanian public that was largely skeptical and to a certain extent apathetic. Polls¹ reveal the previous members of parliament, elected in 2013, were not effective in representing the views of citizens. However, a new election law, with a candidate list system, is meant to improve and diversify representation in parliament but Jordanians are keen to see if political parties and civil society organizations are encouraged to play a larger role in the upcoming elections on September 20, 2016 and beyond. If they are not encouraged by their communities to do so, the risk will be greater that Jordanians will still base their vote on individuals running rather than on policies that are presented by national lists and parties.

Civil society organizations continue to play a big part in energizing the youth, who make up the majority of the population. Although there have been recent campaigns to encourage youth voter participation by various organizations, generally, youth still feel they are not part of the decision making process in Jordan.² A recent pre-election observer joint mission by the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute stressed the need for greater inclusion of women and youth as one of the most “important elements to ensuring that Jordanians trust the integrity of the election process and view results as legitimate.”³

Moreover, the media has largely been absent in simplifying and reaching out to the average Jordanian citizen to increase awareness regarding the complexities and technicalities of the new election law. There have been few initiatives by independent media outlets such as Aramram

¹ “Survey finds growing dissatisfaction with economy among Jordanians,” The Jordan Times, 21 June 2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/survey-finds-growing-dissatisfaction-economy-among-jordanians>

² “Jordan path to youth engagement & empowerment in Jordan,” Creative Associates International 2 February 2016, <http://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/insights/the-path-to-youth-engagement-empowerment-in-jordan/>

³ International Republican Institute. (2016). *Conditions in Place for Democratic Elections in Jordan; Parliamentary Credibility Depends on Enacting Will of Voters, IRI and NDI Joint Assessment Finds*. Retrieved from: <http://www.iri.org/resource/conditions-place-democratic-elections-jordan-parliamentary-credibility-depends-enacting>

web TV and the dissemination of information by the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) to simplify and explain the new law but certainly not enough has been done in terms of voter education.

Candidates were given only one month to campaign and all eyes were on the coverage of the campaigns by the media and candidates themselves: the use of new media tools, accurate, transparent and in-depth coverage by national media outlets not only before the elections, but also during and after the elections as well.

A New Election Law and Public Attitudes

In August 2015, Jordan's government introduced a new election law, which many view as more inclusive and representative than the previous election law, which was based on the 'one person, one vote' formula.

Meanwhile, key provisions in the new election law⁴ include Article 8, which divides the country into electoral districts that include 130 parliamentary seats and Article 9 states that a party or bloc, an electoral alliance must provide a list of candidates for each district. The number of names listed can be no greater than the total number of seats available. The voter casts a vote for one of the lists first, and then vote for one candidate on that list. Then once votes are tallied the number of seats a party or bloc list gets is proportional to its vote total. The candidate that wins most votes from that list is elected.

In general, Jordanians were disappointed by the performance of the previous parliament⁵ that was elected in 2013 and that has impacted attitudes toward the upcoming elections. A poll by RASED, Al Hayat's monitoring coalition, revealed that 75 percent of former members planned to run in the next lower house of parliament. In the same poll, nearly 40 percent of citizens interviewed said they planned

⁴ Law on the Election of the House of Representatives, Law No. (6) of 2016, http://www.entikhabat.jo/sites/default/files/2ParliamentaryElectionLawMay2016EN.docx%20%281%29_0.pdf

⁵ "Survey finds growing dissatisfaction with economy among Jordanians," The Jordan Times, 21 June 2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/survey-finds-growing-dissatisfaction-economy-among-jordanians>

to boycott the elections, and 29 percent of eligible voters said they were still not sure if they would participate.⁶ “My work takes me all across Jordan, my impression is that there is clear dissatisfaction in the performance of the [previous] parliament,” said Haifa Haidar, an activist who has conducted research studies on civil society organizations in Jordan.⁷

The announcement of the new election law nearly a year ago came to the surprise of columnists, political analysts and former politicians who were interviewed for this report. Although all of them expressed relief that the ‘one person, one vote’ formula ending, they argue the ‘one person, one vote’ which has been imposed since 1993 increased tribalism and a parliament that has favored government loyalists, mainly due to gerrymandering and the lack of votes being spread out among different open seats. They argue, the previous formula weakened the Islamic Action Front, the largest opposition party and had prevented the development of meaningful political parties. It entrenched the notion of voting for individuals and tribes. Therefore, despite the participation of opposition parties and lists this time around, political parties remain largely unknown and weak in the upcoming elections.

In the view of the government, the introduction of the new election law is a step toward a series of reform efforts and the inclusion of an independent electoral commission and decentralization law. The participation of different political parties this time around, including the Islamic Action Front, which consistently boycotted the elections, is a step toward legitimizing the country’s electoral process. Still, rural areas, independents and loyalists will be highly represented in the upcoming elections while opposition groups would not receive more than 30 seats, according to Oreib Rantawi⁸, a political analyst and director of Al Quds Center for Political Studies.

⁶ “75% of 17th Lower House members plan to run for in coming elections,” The Jordan Times, 10 July 2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/75-17th-lower-house-members-plan-run-coming-elections%E2%80%9999>

⁷ Personal Interview with Haifa Haidar, 23 August, 2015.

⁸ “Attack on the Muslim Brotherhood....,” Addustour Newspaper, 6 August, 2016, <https://shar.es/1ZArNU>

The tone of the campaigns themselves, the formulation of the lists and mobilization efforts during the elections could have made a greater impact in terms of participation for undecided Jordanians or registered voters who were reluctant to vote. There were fears being raised that a period of one month would neither be enough to convince hesitant voters to make thorough decisions about candidates nor for citizens to become more familiar with the new election law. "The constricted time frame gives the IEC little time to prepare for a new and complicated electoral process, for parties to strategize and campaign, and for voter education and outreach to reach an adequate portion of the population."⁹

As announcements of names on 'national lists' began to emerge, however, political analysts like Sabri Rubheit warned that the lists were looking like they were in fact not based so much on policies or parties. "It's a list of names not a program...in many instances you find persons on the same list that have nothing in common, they have vastly different political ideologies, or programs or personalities."¹⁰

Public attitudes, as monitored on social media through comments by readers on the Independent Elections Committee Facebook page, continue to reveal a sense of skepticism among citizens that elections will be free and fair or, more accurately, that they will be transparent despite consistent official replies to readers and videos produced by the IEC. The reader comments¹¹ also reveal there is still a lack of understanding about the new election law and the process itself.

Despite the low confidence in the performance of parliament, a recent poll by the International Republican Institute reveals that Jordanians do care about political reform. During an interview¹² with former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Marwan Muasher, he stated

⁹ International Republican Institute. (2016). *Conditions in Place for Democratic Elections in Jordan; Parliamentary Credibility Depends on Enacting Will of Voters, IRI and NDI Joint Assessment Finds*. Retrieved from <http://www.iri.org/resource/conditions-place-democratic-elections-jordan-parliamentary-credibility-depends-enacting>

¹⁰ "The election lottery," Al Ghad Newspaper, 5 August 2016, <http://alghad.com/articles/1050692>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/EntikhabatJO/>

¹² Personal Interview with Marwan Muasher, 7 June 2015.

there was a clear lack of confidence and trust between the people and the government. “The solution to these concerns cannot come except through political reform. If you are worried about the lack of jobs and inequality then that can only be remedied through political reform, in other words through, strengthening parliament, and diluting the dominance of the executive authority over public life. If you are worried about improving your economic situation, the solution can also only come through political reform, or through what I call developing a system of checks and balances so that any abuses of the executive authority are checked by the strong parliament. If you don’t have a strong parliament then economic reform in the country will not be inclusive and causes corruption.”

Marginalized Youth and the Media Landscape

There has been a push by international and local non-governmental organizations to target youth and encourage them to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections. However, such momentum should not only target youth in the run up to the elections but there needs to be a systematic push for youth to participate and feel they have a role during and after the elections as well. “Jordanians do not believe that reform is real, and they do not believe that their voices are being heard, they think they are being talked to and contained and managed including youth organizations,” explained Curtis Ryan, a political science professor at Appalachian State University in North Carolina who specializes in Jordanian political affairs.¹³ “They are saying that it’s about slogans and new pitches and so on, but it’s not really about effective participation.”

A poll¹⁴ conducted this year by the IRI, in which 1,000 Jordanians were randomly selected, indicated that 72 percent of the respondents believed the impact of the last parliament moved Jordan either in a worse direction or in a much worse direction. The poll also revealed that politicians are not addressing the needs of young people

¹³ Personal Interview with Curtis Ryan, 6 June 2015.

¹⁴ International Republican Institute. (2016).
http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2016_jordan.pdf

and 53 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that politicians do not listen to the needs and ideas of young people.

“To realize a more vibrant and inclusive political system, young people must understand and value the importance of their vote and their participation in campaigns and elections. Targeted outreach, education efforts, and the opportunity to serve as observers, monitors, and volunteers prior to and on Election Day will contribute to greater inclusivity of Jordanian youth into the political process.”¹⁵

With high levels of education and literacy and signs that digitization is changing the way citizens are consuming information, the use of digital media should have been explored more thoroughly by candidates and utilized by the media. Jordanians are increasingly using social networking sites as venues for debates on social issues and to influence public opinion. The public uses these websites to consume, contribute and share information.

A study by the Jordan Media Institute that monitored the first 10 days of election coverage noted there was a severe lack of reporting in governorates outside of Amman.¹⁶ The media also relied mainly on reporting news instead of in-depth features. Only a few independent media platforms like www.aramram.com ran a series of videos¹⁷ clearly addressing the ‘everyday person on the street’ and explained the new electoral system. Some efforts were made to publish info graphs with facts and figures about the upcoming elections, a number of op-eds about the election law and public attitudes have been published, a few informational videos and even songs were made to encourage people to vote on Election Day. Still, the lack of professionalism and weak editorial decisions to dedicate resources and depth into the upcoming parliamentary

¹⁵ International Republican Institute. (2016). *Conditions in Place for Democratic Elections in Jordan; Parliamentary Credibility Depends on Enacting Will of Voters, IRI and NDI Joint Assessment Finds*. Retrieved from: <http://www.iri.org/resource/conditions-place-democratic-elections-jordan-parliamentary-credibility-depends-enacting>

¹⁶ “72.5% of reports on elections in print media rely on one source only.” Jordan Times, 3 September 2016, <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/725-reports-elections-print-media-rely-one-source%E2%80%9999>

¹⁷ “How to vote.” *Aramram.com, Amman. 2016*, http://aramram.com/209PSA_Want-to-vote

election coverage among some news outlets remain obstacles to a more comprehensive and effective coverage.

Online advertising used by political figures to obtain favorable coverage in the 2013 elections remained a concern during this upcoming election. Rumors and favorable coverage for advertisements further increase mistrust in the media, resulting in a greater sense of apathy among citizens.

On the other hand, participation in public debates during and after the elections will be crucial to observe in order to determine the level of interest in the upcoming elections and the performance of the upcoming parliament. Debates open a direct channel between candidates, opponents and voters. Candidates who want to be re-elected and participate in such debates will likely face a skeptical public in search of answers. The public debates offer an opportunity for political parties and groups running on national lists to present their programs.

Despite the improvements in the new election law and the cancelation of the 'one person, one vote' formula, there are clear challenges that lie ahead. The media has to regularly provide comprehensive campaign and election coverage in order to increase voter education and to inform the public whom they are voting for. The media needs to use multi-media tools, publish feature stories on candidates who run again and to outline their accomplishments and failures while they were in parliament. The lack of comprehensive media coverage and weak voter education, the marginalization of youth before, after and during the campaign period and the lack of national lists that are based on actual programs will continue to weaken the election process and result in a recurrence of majority votes based on individuals and tribal affiliations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on this assessment, the following policy recommendations should be implemented:

Issue: Assessing the role of parliament and its influence

During the 2013 municipal elections, voters in Amman were allowed to elect only two-thirds of the city's municipal council members. The remaining third was appointed by the government. Due to the lack of comprehensive municipality elections, bloated bureaucracies and inadequate budgets, parliamentarians and citizens feel that parliament has become a social services based parliament instead of a genuine voice in government policies. There is a feeling that parliament does not have a say in political affairs and nationwide decisions. Therefore, for citizens to grow more confident in the electoral process, they will need to know if members of parliament will sit in government, or have a genuine voice in ministerial appointments – which speaks to public confidence in the electoral process, and of course their participation, if they view parliamentary elections as a marginal exercise that doesn't ultimately deliver desired positive change on the ground.

Secondly, the success of the upcoming elections may well hinge on the election process itself – the tone of the campaigns and mobilization efforts. There is a need for fundamental change in the way candidates run their campaigns. They will need to pursue new and creative ways to present themselves to the public. Moreover, all eyes will continue to be on political parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood and those running on the national lists – how they run their campaigns, and if they will be able to form a unified message and garner support.

Recommendations: Municipal elections should be held and an allocated budget should be available and reflect the needs in order for parliament to move further away from providing social services and personal favors in their districts. Moreover, parliament must gain more power and exert influence so there is a process of checks and balances.

All candidates running for parliamentary elections must be aware of the importance of their campaign messaging and be prepared to present more policy-focused programs or agendas; this includes parties running on national lists. The candidates need to be active in speaking to their constituents in their districts to garner support and

revitalize the youth vote, which has been absent despite the fact that youth make up the majority of the population. Now and in the future, all eyes will be on the management of the campaigns, media relations and the use of new media as well as public speeches and debates. Candidates must utilize social media and involve youth in their campaigns as well to work with them on social media.

Issue: Strengthening civil society organizations and youth outreach

Restraint of public voice is a huge issue both around the election process and broader political reform situation. More recently there has been a clear crackdown on civil society organization activities.¹⁸ Bureaucratic and security obstacles, including from governor offices to halt public events, have increasingly taken place in the past few months. These constraints will continue to hinder the work and dialogue spurred by civil society organizations in the past few years. If public debates and events are prohibited in some cases, the risk will be greater that Jordanians will grow more apathetic and mistrustful in decisions made by the government. Parliamentarians will not be held accountable, especially those who served previously in parliament. Civil society organizations have a big role to play in the campaigning, election day and after elections as well, and in encouraging their communities to do so. The lack of public debates and voter education will make Jordanians vote for individual candidates rather than on policies presented and debated.¹⁹ Moreover, civil society has a big role to play when it comes to energizing the youth vote.

Recommendations: Activities by civil society organizations, for the most part have been peaceful. CSOs should be allowed to hold events like public debates and dialogue without them fearing any repercussions. Public debates were held in 2013 in different governorates in Jordan without any disturbances or violence. There should

¹⁸ See <http://www.alghad.com/articles/905564-99> (accessed 1 December 2015).

¹⁹ See http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/jordan-enp-report-2015_en.pdf (accessed 2 December 2015).

not be a regression in issuing permits or for vague but blatant refusals when it comes to such events being held. The UN Human Rights Committee, the treaty monitoring body of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Jordan, stresses the importance “uninhibited expression” with respect to debate concerning public officials in the political domain and public institutions.²⁰

Issue: The changing media landscape and elections coverage

There is a weakness in campaign coverage by national media outlets and most stories that are published are news events rather than in-depth coverage. Typically, the coverage includes press releases, statements by some parliamentarians or by the government. Newspapers and online news websites have published the election law with little clarification or simplifying the law for the average reader, thus voter education remains a problem even a month before and during the campaign process. Although short videos and info graphs have been published, much more has to be done.

Moreover, online news websites especially have been accused in the past of conflict of interest as they accept advertising from candidates in turn for favorable coverage or are pressured to publish negative attacks against other candidates.

Recommendation: Editors-in-chief need to hold special meetings for election coverage to map out how their outlet plans to cover the campaigns, the Election Day itself and the days after as well. There continues to be a deficit in profile stories, features for example ‘a day in the life’ stories, investigations, or storytelling through multimedia. If parliamentarians are running again, feature stories should outline what they have accomplished, what they stood for, what parties on the national lists running they stand for. They need to show the backstory of the candidates. Feature

²⁰ See https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/gl.2015.9.9.letter_to_pm_re_penal_code_0.pdf (accessed 1 December 2015)

stories should include a wide variety of opinions and include a lot of research about the candidates so that people learn about their stories, why they are running for parliament and what they hope to accomplish. Newspapers and online news websites and television stations can use the power of social media to include live streaming events for example by using Facebook Live to show candidates at events and what they are doing to encourage citizens to vote for them.

About the Author

Rana F. Sweis is a freelance journalist and media researcher. Her work has been published in the New York Times, The International New York Times, The Huffington Post and other media outlets. She is currently working on completing the manuscript for Voices of Jordan, an interview-based, journalistic book dedicated to providing a compelling collage of contemporary Jordanian narratives.

About FES Amman

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a non-profit organization committed to the values of social democracy and is the oldest of Germany's political foundations. In Jordan, FES opened its office in 1986 and is accredited through a long-standing partnership with the Royal Scientific Society (RSS). The aims of the activities of the FES Amman are to promote democracy and political participation, to support progress towards social justice and gender equality as well as to contribute to ecological sustainability and peace and security in the region. FES Amman supports the building and strengthening of civil society and public institutions in Jordan and Iraq. FES Amman cooperates with a wide range of partner institutions from civil society and the political sphere to establish platforms for democratic dialogue, organize conferences, hold workshops and publish policy papers on current political questions.



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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq
P.O. Box 941876
Amman 11194
Jordan

Tel. +962 6 5008335
Fax: +962 6 5696478

Email: fes@fes-jordan.org

Website: www.fes-jordan.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/FESAmmanOffice

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