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Freedom in the World 2015 - Jordan

2015 Scores

Status

Not Free

Freedom Rating

(1 = best, 7 = worst)
5.5

Civil Liberties

(1 = best, 7 = worst)
5

Political Rights

(1 = best, 7 = worst)
6
Overview:

In 2014, Jordan continued to grapple with the economic, social, and security implications of the ongoing Syrian conflict. Public services and the national budget are under acute strain. With the help of the international community, additional refugee camps were established in Jordan to ease conditions in Zaatari, one of the largest camps in the world. In total, the UN Refugee Agency has identified more than 620,000 “persons of concern” in the country. While a number of Iraqi Christians have been settled in Jordan as well, the government denies entry to refugees of Palestinian origin, regardless of their citizenship.

The regional rise of jihadist groups has led to policies to tackle growing extremism within Jordan. Some 1,800 Jordanians have left to fight with the Islamic State (IS) militant group or with Jabhat al-Nusra. Imams have been banned for preaching pro-IS sermons, and returning jihadists have faced antiterrorism charges before the State Security Court (SSC).

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 11 / 40 (+1) [\[Key\]](#)

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

King Abdullah II holds broad executive powers, appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet, and may dissolve the bicameral National Assembly at his discretion. Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour and his 19-member cabinet were nominated by the parliament before their appointment. Legislative representatives in the Chamber of Deputies, or lower house, are elected through universal adult suffrage. The Senate is appointed by the king and constitutes the upper house. The central government appoints regional governors.

Parliamentary elections in 2013 were the first under the newly adopted Election Law in which voters cast two ballots. One vote is cast for a party list in which candidates are selected through proportional representation in a single nationwide constituency. Another candidate is selected through the old single nontransferable vote system based on local electoral districts. The Chamber of Deputies was expanded from 120 to 150 members, 27 of whom are selected through closed party lists. The Senate was also enlarged, to 75 seats.

In 2013, international observers noted instances of vote buying and criticized the electoral laws as unfair. Political campaigning was seen as noncompetitive and relatively absent in wide areas of the country due to the overall influence of tribal affiliations, a lack of financing, and boycotting by opposition groups. The elections were carried by East Bank tribal elites and independent businessmen loyal to the regime.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 6 / 16

Jordanians are free to join political parties, though in practice, votes are cast along nonpartisan, tribal lines. Changes to the Political Party Law in 2012 reduced many bureaucratic obstacles while increasing demographic and geographic requirements meant to ensure that new political parties enjoy nationwide support. In a change from previous practice, the new law resulted in the election of 27 out of 150 deputies from nationwide party lists. However, flaws within the electoral law, gerrymandering, and the small role of the nationwide constituency are not conducive to genuine political competition. The Chamber of Deputies is heavily imbalanced in favor of rural districts, whose residents are generally of Transjordanian (East Bank) origin. Urban areas, where Palestinian-Jordanians and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood are heavily concentrated, account for more than two-thirds of the population but less than one-third of deputies. The Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF), seen as the country's strongest party, boycotted the 2010 and 2013 parliamentary elections to protest inherent disadvantages in the system.

Christian and Circassian minorities are guaranteed nine and three seats, respectively.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

Key powers and decision-making abilities are ultimately vested in the king. The Chamber of Deputies may approve, reject, or amend legislation proposed by the cabinet, but it cannot enact laws without the assent of the royally appointed Senate. King Abdullah is empowered to dismiss parliament as well as the prime minister and cabinet. The king can delay parliamentary elections for up to two years and may rule by royal decree during periods in which parliament is not in session. Civil society groups have complained about a lack of inclusion in policymaking, particularly in deliberations over the amendments to the Press and Publications Law. Disputes between parliamentarians have resulted in physical scuffles in years past.

The government has undertaken some efforts to combat widespread corruption. The National Integrity Commission was formed in December 2012 to investigate allegations, while the Privatization Review Committee, formed in January 2013, was tasked with reviewing the privatization of state-run enterprises that has led to scandals in the past. Prime Minister Ensour launched a five-year anticorruption strategy in June 2013. However, weak investigative journalism, limited access to information, and a lack of institutional checks and balances have prevented significant action. Jordan ranked 55 out of 175 countries and territories in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 25 / 60 (+1)**D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16**

Freedom of expression is restricted by numerous laws that criminalize defamation, the denigration of government, and the incitement of sectarian strife. Traditional and online journalists have been arrested for criticizing the king, exposing corruption, and violating a vague requirement in the Press and Publications Law mandating media objectivity. The government pressures editors to control the media. Self-censorship is pervasive, particularly in reporting on the royal family, foreign leaders, and certain societal taboos.

Most broadcast news outlets remain under state control, but satellite dishes and the internet give residents access to foreign media. While there are dozens of private newspapers and magazines, the government has broad powers to close them and often engages in prepublication censorship of news stories. Almost all of the approximately 300 news websites blocked in June 2013 have since become unblocked after registering with the Ministry of Commerce and obtaining licenses from the Department of Press and Publications. One notable exception is the blog 7iber, which had refused to apply for a license out of protest. It operated using a mirror site after its principal web address was blocked, but the mirror was blocked in the summer of 2014, and it was taken to court for running an unlicensed operation. In December it obtained a license after appointing a new editor-in-chief in compliance with the law.

Islam is the state religion, but Christians are recognized as a religious minority and can worship freely. Baha'is and Druze are allowed to practice their faiths as well, though a lack of state recognition has resulted in de facto discrimination. The government monitors sermons at mosques, and preachers cannot practice without written government permission. Only state-appointed councils may issue religious edicts, and it is illegal to criticize these rulings. Political, sectarian, and extremist speech are outlawed at mosques under the Preaching and Guidance law, and several imams were banned for pro-IS sermons in October 2014.

Academic freedom is generally respected, and Jordanians openly discuss political developments within established red lines. However, there have been reports of a heavy intelligence presence on some university campuses, as well as some violent incidents.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12 (+1)

Under recent changes to the Public Gatherings Law, prior permission is not required to stage a demonstration. Demonstrations have turned violent, such as in March 2014, when protesters gathered in front of parliament to call for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador over the March 10 killing of a Jordanian-Palestinian judge at a Jordan-Palestine border crossing controlled by Israeli soldiers. Allegations of excessive force at the demonstration by Jordan's gendarmerie were not investigated, indicative of the overall environment of impunity. In June, black Islamic banners—often used by Salafists and jihadists—were raised in Maan, Jordan's poorest city, where residents were frustrated by police violence that had left 10 people dead. More protests against police killings took place in April.

Freedom of association is limited. The Ministry of Social Development has the authority to reject registration and foreign funding requests for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and can disband organizations it finds objectionable. NGOs supporting associations with political purposes are prohibited, and all board members must be vetted by state security. Nonetheless, many international NGOs operate freely in the country.

Workers have collective bargaining rights but must receive government permission to strike. More than 30 percent of the workforce is organized into 17 unions.

F. Rule of Law: 6 / 16

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. Provincial governors can order administrative detention for up to one year under a 1954 Crime Prevention Law that leaves little room for appeal. Prison conditions are poor, and inmates reportedly undergo severe beatings and other abuse from guards. Torture allegations are rarely prosecuted or result only in minor disciplinary penalties.

While most trials in civilian courts are open and procedurally sound, the quasi-military SSC may close its proceedings to the public. In early 2014 the government limited the jurisdiction of the SSC to high crimes of espionage, drugs, terrorism, treason, and currency counterfeiting. However, 2014 amendments to the 2006

antiterrorism law broadened its definition to include nonviolent offenses, such as using information networks to support, promote, or fund terrorism, as well as acts to harm Jordan's relations with a foreign country. The latter charge, already present in article 118 of the penal code, was used in 2013 to charge staff at *Jafrā News*.

In September 2014, Omar Othman—also known as Abu Qatada—was released from prison after being cleared of terrorism charges in two separate trials. The SSC had used a confession by an accomplice, likely secured under torture, to evaluate the case, contrary to previous assurances provided to the United Kingdom, which extradited Othman in 2013.

Jordanians of Palestinian origin are marginalized from jobs in the public sector and security forces, which are dominated by East Bank tribes. Discrimination against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals is prevalent. Consensual same-sex sexual activity is not accepted in the conservative society, though it is not prohibited by law. A group of 10 gay and lesbian individuals were arrested at a private gathering in February 2014; authorities stated that they intervened “to prevent a disturbance of the peace.” Activists fighting for LGBT rights face pressure from the secret police. In 2009, the Ministry of Social Development rejected an application to establish an NGO supporting LGBT rights on the basis that it would “violate the public morals and decency,” and attempts to register others have failed since.

Poor living conditions and restrictions on freedom of movement have resulted in violent riots at the Zaatari camp in northern Jordan. While the majority of Syrian refugees live and work in cities, they are only legally permitted to work inside refugee camps. Syrian refugees have also been turned away from public schools due to overcrowding, despite their right to free education. There have been reported incidents of border authorities rejecting unmarried Syrian men of military age or refugees with Palestinian origins, against international norms on *nonrefoulement*. In some cases, Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship who reenter the country from Syria, having left in the 1970s, have been denied entry or stripped of their citizenship during routine public services. Due to legal constraints, Palestinians are not allowed to live in Syrian refugee camps and may not seek legal income to pay for their housing.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16

Citizens enjoy freedom of domestic movement and international travel under the law, though there have been reports of refugees being denied travel and others that passports have been confiscated from foreign migrant workers. Under a 2013 law, women are no longer required to obtain their husbands' permission when applying for a passport.

Jordan was ranked 117 out of 189 economies in the 2015 World Bank's *Doing Business* ranking due to obstacles in obtaining credit, protecting minority investors, enforcing contracts, and resolving insolvency.

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. In the 2013 elections, women represented 13 percent of all candidates. The lower house of parliament reserves 10 percent of seats for women, and the upper house contains eight female senators.

In November 2014, the government announced that children of Jordanian mothers but foreign fathers will be able access to free public services such as education, private property ownership, and greater employment opportunities, but will still be barred from full citizenship. A woman that suffers domestic abuse is often placed in administrative detention and can only be released when a male member of her family gives his assurance that she will not be harmed. Men who commit “honor crimes” against women receive lenient sentences. Women's rights activists have staged campaigns against honor killings and a penal code provision that allows alleged rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims. A Christian father killed his daughter for converting to Islam in May 2014 in Ajloun province. Although the legal age of marriage is 18, girls can be married as young as 15 if a judge in a Sharia court deems it is in her best interest. A 2013 report by the Chief Islamic Justice Department showed that more than 10 percent of all marriages from 2000 to 2013 involved girls under age 18. Many parents decide to marry off their daughters, often to older men, due to financial difficulties or out of fear of sexual violence in refugee camps.

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. Jordan is a destination and transit country for human trafficking for forced labor and, to a lesser extent, prostitution.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)

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