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Freedom in the World 2012 - Jordan

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 5.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 6

Overview

Although demands for political reform grew as the year progressed, Jordan's King Abdullah avoided the major challenges to his rule that characterized other uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. Constitutional amendments and a government reshuffle allowed the king to temporarily alleviate popular discontent. However, little improvement was made to Jordan's record on corruption and press freedom by year's end.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, then known as Transjordan, was established as a League of Nations mandate under British control in 1921 and won full independence in 1946. The 46-year reign of King Hussein, which began in 1953, featured a massive influx of Palestinian refugees, the occupation of the West Bank by 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.

When Crown Prince Abdullah II succeeded his father in 1999, the kingdom faced severe economic problems. 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 were imposed after 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*) that began in 2000. The year 2001 began a period of more than two years in which Abdullah ruled by decree and in which due process and personal freedoms were curtailed. 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 in exchange for silencing their critiques of 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, before 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 law in 2008 required parties to have broader membership bases, and the number of registered parties consequently fell to 14, from 37.

The king unexpectedly dismissed parliament in November 2009 and ruled by decree without elections until November 2010. International observers deemed the November 2010 polls to have been technically well conducted, but the IAF boycotted them, citing structural biases that guaranteed the success of the king's traditional supporters.

Jordan largely avoided the widespread political unrest that swept across the Middle East in 2011. Calls for reform did escalate late in the year, though, resulting in the October resignation of Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit and all but four Cabinet ministers. The king replaced Bakhit with Awn Khasawneh, a former judge at the International Court of Justice considered friendly to reform. While the king's actions aimed to placate popular demands, they have not yet produced significant change. The IAF has no formal role in the new government. Both the king and the prime minister have promised to grant parliament a direct role in forming governments, as well as to hold a "public debate" over changes to the election law, but the timeline for such shifts remained unclear.

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 bicameral National Assembly at his discretion. The 120 members of the lower house of the National Assembly, the Chamber of Deputies, are elected through universal adult suffrage. The Chamber of Deputies 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.

Voters must choose a single candidate in what are generally multiseat districts. Reformers have long called for a move toward proportional representation, arguing that the existing system encourages voting based on tribal ties rather than political and ideological affiliation. The 2010 election law reinforces these traditional allegiances by creating large electoral zones, each with several subdistricts. Both voters and candidates can choose to vote or run in any subdistrict within their zone, effectively making it easier for well-connected candidates to engineer victories for themselves and their allies. Constitutional amendments approved by the king in September 2011 call for an independent organization to monitor elections, but implementation has lagged. In late October, the government postponed municipal elections originally scheduled for December, in order to extend the voter registration period and to address concerns over the previous government's proposed changes to the election law.

The security forces exercise significant influence over political life by limiting freedoms of speech and assembly. Opposition figures also charge that the General Intelligence Department (GID) has hindered prospects for reform by meddling in the activities of the cabinet.

The Chamber of Deputies remains heavily imbalanced in favor of rural districts, whose residents are generally of Transjordanian (East Bank) origin. Twelve seats are reserved for women, and the Christian and Circassian minorities are guaranteed nine and three seats, respectively. As noncitizen residents, Jordan's roughly 600,000 refugees, overwhelmingly Palestinian, cannot vote.

Efforts to combat corruption in recent years have yielded mixed results, and investigations and arrests rarely lead to serious punishment. Corruption charges against former prime minister Marouf al-Bakhit in connection with a high-profile casino deal

were dropped in June 2011 along with those of 13 other cabinet members, leaving only a former tourism minister to face charges. In February, a group of Bedouin tribal figures – traditionally staunch supporters of the king – released an unprecedented statement charging Queen Rania with corruption. Jordan was ranked 56 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is restricted, and those who violate unwritten rules, or red lines, regarding reporting on the royal family and certain societal taboos face arrest. While imprisonment was abolished as a penalty for press offenses in 2007, journalists can still be jailed under the penal code. In September 2011, a draft law was approved that would fine journalists up to approximately \$85,000 for reporting on corruption without "solid facts." Self-censorship is common in Jordan, and the government regularly gives both warnings and bribes to journalists to keep them from crossing red lines. In July 2011, police assaulted 16 local and international journalists who were covering protests in Amman. Unidentified men charged into the office of the news website *Al-Muharrir* and threatened the editor, Jihad Abu Baidar, after reporting on an anticorruption commission investigating the former chief-of-staff, General Khaled Jamil al-Saraira.

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 receive tips about potentially offensive articles by informers at printing presses, and editors are urged to remove such material. Websites are subject to similar restrictions, and police have considerable discretion in monitoring and sanctioning online content.

Islam is the state religion. Christians are recognized as religious minorities and can worship freely. While Baha'is and Druze are not officially recognized, they are allowed to practice their faiths. The government monitors sermons at mosques, where political activity is banned. Preachers cannot practice without written government permission. Only state-appointed councils may issue religious edicts, and it is illegal to criticize these rulings.

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.

Freedom of assembly is generally restricted, and provincial governors often deny permission to hold demonstrations. Jordan's limited protests in 2011 primarily targeted the Bakhit government rather than the king or the royal family. While the scale of the protests remained small, some demonstrations did turn violent. In March and July, security forces reportedly used weapons including wooden clubs and water hoses to disperse protests in Amman, injuring a number of demonstrators.

Freedom of association is limited. The Ministry of Social Development has the authority to reject registration and foreign funding requests for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Furthermore, NGOs supporting associations with political purposes are prohibited. While widely feared restrictions on foreign funding have not yet materialized, the Ministry of Social Development at times rejects requests for foreign funding approval. State security must approve all NGO board members, and the Ministry of Social Development can shuffle NGO boards and disband organizations it finds objectionable.

Workers have collective bargaining rights but must receive government permission to strike. More than 30 percent of the workforce is organized into 17 unions. Teachers in several cities went on strike in March 2011 to demand the creation of a national teachers' union, though the government has not met their demands. Labor rights organizations have raised concerns about poor working conditions and sexual abuse in Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs), where mostly female and foreign factory workers process goods for export.

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. The prime minister may refer any case to the SSC, and people convicted of misdemeanors by the SSC lack the right of appeal. While recent constitutional amendments would place all crimes except treason, espionage, and terrorism outside the SSC's purview, specific legislation has not been adopted yet to institutionalize this change. Groups like the IAF continue to call for the SSC to be dissolved altogether.

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. Suspects referred to the SSC 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. Torture is routinely employed by the GID to obtain confessions in SSC cases. Prison conditions are poor, and inmates reportedly experience severe beatings and other abuse by guards.

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. Although women constitute only about 23 percent of the workforce, the government has made efforts to increase the number of women in the civil service. Women are guaranteed 12 seats in the lower house of parliament and 20 percent of municipal council seats. The upper house of parliament currently has seven female senators. 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 – a provision often applied to benefit men who commit "honor crimes" against women. In February 2011, a man was accused of the premeditated murder of his sister – whom he confessed to stabbing 35 times – in order to "cleanse the family's honor." Between 15 and 20 such crimes occur in Jordan each year.

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