



Jordan

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

34

NOT FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	11 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	23 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

37 /100

Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Status Change

Jordan's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to harsh new restrictions on freedom of assembly, a crackdown on the teachers' union

following a series of strikes and protests, and factors including a lack of adequate preparations that harmed the quality of parliamentary elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview

Jordan is a monarchy in which the king plays a dominant role in politics and governance. The parliament's lower house is elected, but the electoral system puts the opposition at a disadvantage, and the chamber wields little power in practice. The media and civil society groups are hampered by restrictive laws and government pressure. The judicial system lacks independence and often fails to ensure due process.

Key Developments in 2020

- Jordanian authorities initiated one of the world's harshest COVID-19 lockdowns in March, after King Abdullah II invoked a preexisting defense law. Jordanians were confined to their homes, and grocery stores and pharmacies were among the establishments shuttered during a three-day lockdown that month. While many measures were lifted in June, nightly curfews and mass-gathering limits remained in force at year's end.
- The government shuttered the country's teacher's union in July, after it accused the government of reneging on a salary deal reached in 2019. Authorities forcibly dispersed demonstrations against the closure—arresting over 250 people by August—and forced detainees to sign pledges promising to refrain from future demonstrations to secure their release.
- Voters elected a new parliament in November, with tribal elites and progovernment businesspeople representing the bulk of the new body. The Islamic Action Front (IAF)—the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan—won five seats in contest marred by a dearth of campaigning, lower turnout due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and continued malapportionment.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

Jordan's hereditary monarch, King Abdullah II, holds broad executive powers. He appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet and may dissolve the bicameral National Assembly at his discretion. Constitutional amendments adopted in 2016 empowered the king to make a number of other appointments, including the crown prince and a regent, without a royal decree countersigned by the prime minister or other cabinet ministers.

Abdullah II dissolved the parliament in September 2020, and Omar al-Razzaz, a former World Bank economist and education minister, resigned in early October. Al-Razzaz was succeeded by Bisher al-Khasawneh, a veteran diplomat and royal adviser, who was named to the post several days later.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

1 / 4

The king appoints the 65 members of the upper house of the parliament, the Senate. The lower house, the 115-seat House of Representatives, is elected for four-year terms or until the parliament is dissolved. Its members win office through races in 23 multimember districts, with 15 seats reserved for the leading women candidates who failed to capture district seats. Twelve district seats are reserved for religious and ethnic minorities.

The royal court announced its intention to trigger an election in a July 2020 statement, and Abdullah II dissolved the parliament in late September. However, uncertainty over the early-November polling date amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic prompted some candidates to delay campaign efforts. International observers, who regularly monitor parliamentary elections, were largely absent.

Independents, many of whom were tribal figures and businesspeople considered loyal to the monarchy, won 133 seats. The IAF won five, along with the Islah Alliance and the Muslim Center Party. Voter turnout stood at 29.9 percent, down from 36 percent in 2016. Vote buying, which was observed in 2016, became more common during the November 2020 contest, partially due to the dire economic situation caused by the pandemic.

Elections were held in 2017 for mayors, local and municipal councils, and 12 new governorate councils created under a 2015 decentralization law. However, 15 percent of the governorate council seats are appointed, and the councils have no legislative authority. A quarter of the seats in the Amman municipal council are also appointed by the government. As with the parliamentary elections, independent tribal candidates won the vast majority of seats, while the IAF and its allies won a plurality of the few seats captured by party-based candidates.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	1 / 4
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Elections are administered by the Independent Election Commission (IEC), which generally receives positive reviews from international monitors in terms of technical management, though irregularities continue to be reported. IEC members are appointed by royal decree.

The 2016 electoral-law reform introduced multiple-vote proportional representation for parliamentary elections, replacing a single nontransferable vote system that favored progovernment businesspeople

and tribal elites over opposition-oriented political parties. The new law also redrew district lines in an attempt to mitigate acute malapportionment that has long placed urban voters at a severe disadvantage.

Even after these changes, rural and tribal voters, who make up the regime's support base, remain heavily overrepresented. For example, 59,000 eligible voters in the district of Ma'an elected four legislators after the new system was introduced, whereas the first district of Zarqa, which is dominated by Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin, had over 450,000 voters electing six legislators. After the November 2020 poll, tribal elites and progovernment businesspeople remained overrepresented within the parliament itself.

The legal framework for elections is unstable. Major changes are often introduced weeks before polling day, hindering campaign efforts. Candidate registration is reportedly easier in some progovernment areas. The IEC has also shown inconsistency managing voter rolls in recent elections, though voter registration was made automatic ahead of the 2016 poll.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because weaknesses in the existing legal framework and continued malapportionment allowed an environment favoring progovernment candidates to persist during the 2020 elections.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

2 / 4

Political parties based on ethnicity, race, gender, or religion are banned in Jordan. Parties must receive approval from the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs. Authorities have reportedly intimidated individuals attempting to form political parties and there is a long-standing fear of creating or joining political parties due to the regime's historically harsh repression of them.

While the IAF has been tolerated, it suffers from electoral malapportionment, which affects its urban support base. Its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been targeted by the authorities for several years. In 2015, the government licensed the offshoot Muslim Brotherhood Society (MBS) and moved to invalidate the original organization's legal registration. The Muslim Brotherhood's offices were forcibly shuttered in 2016, after the regime prevented it from holding internal elections, exacerbating preexisting divisions and weakening it politically. In July 2020, the organization lost an appeal against the transfer of its offices to the MBS, with the Court of Cassation ordering its dissolution in its ruling. The Muslim Brotherhood vowed to appeal, and the IAF participated in the November 2020 poll despite the ruling.

The electoral system favors tribally affiliated independents over political parties with specific ideologies and platforms, as does the patronage-based political culture. In October 2020, the al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported that only 12 percent of candidates relied on party lists to earn votes.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

1 / 4

The political system—including the overrepresentation of rural voters—limits the ability of any party-based opposition to make significant gains. The IAF and the Islah Alliance, which it supported in the November 2020 poll, won a combined nine percent of lower-house seats. Moreover,

the constitutional authority of the monarchy means that no opposition force can win control of the executive branch by democratic means alone.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	1 / 4
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While voters and candidates are generally free from overt threats or violence, they remain heavily influenced by tribal affiliations and the state-sponsored patronage networks that accompany them. The Jordanian intelligence service is widely believed to influence the electoral process. Citizens' political participation is also constrained by the fact that many important positions are appointed rather than elected.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	2 / 4
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Women have equal political rights, and female candidates previously won seats beyond the legal quotas set for the parliament and subnational councils, but cultural prejudices remain an obstacle to women's full participation in practice. Four women won off-quota seats on governorate councils in 2017. Women performed well at the municipal and local levels that year, but none won mayoral posts. No women won parliamentary seats beyond the 15-seat quota in the November 2020 poll.

Nine lower-house seats are reserved for Christians and three for ethnic Circassians and Chechens together. Christians are not permitted to contest nonreserved seats. Citizens of Palestinian origin, who tend to live in urban areas, make up a majority of the overall population but remain politically underrepresented.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0 / 4

The king dominates policymaking and the legislative process. The appointed government submits all draft legislation to the House of Representatives, which may approve, reject, or amend bills, though they require approval from the appointed Senate and the king to become law. Groups of 10 or more lawmakers can propose legislation, but the House must then refer it to the government before it can return to the chamber as a draft law. Among other royal prerogatives, the king unilaterally appoints the heads of the armed forces, the intelligence service, and the gendarmerie.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

2 / 4

The government has undertaken some efforts to combat widespread corruption, and the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Commission (IACC) is tasked with investigating allegations. However, successful prosecutions—particularly of high-ranking officials—are historically rare. Anticorruption efforts are undermined by a lack of genuinely independent enforcement institutions and restrictions on investigative journalism and civil society activism.

In June 2020, the government launched a crackdown targeting businesspeople and politicians suspected of tax evasion, money laundering, and customs evasion, after expanding the IACC's powers. By July, authorities raided 650 firms and were reportedly examining the tax records of 70 individuals. While Jordanians cautiously welcomed the crackdown, observers warned that political opponents were also targeted by the government.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

1 / 4

Access-to-information laws are vague, lack procedural detail, and contain sweeping exceptions. Officials are not required to make public declarations of their income and assets. The National Assembly does not exercise effective or independent oversight of the government's budget proposals. Activists and journalists who attempt to investigate state or royal finances are subject to arrest on defamation and other charges.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

1 / 4

Jordanian media laws are restrictive, vague, and arbitrarily enforced. Various statutes penalize defamation, criticism of the king or state institutions, harming Jordan's relations with foreign states, blasphemy, and any content considered to lack objectivity. Government gag orders and informal instructions to media outlets regarding news coverage are common. News sites face onerous registration requirements that, if not met, can serve as a justification for blocking. Journalists rarely face serious violence or significant jail time for their work, but they often practice self-censorship.

Journalists faced severe restrictions under COVID-19-related measures. In March 2020, the cabinet halted the publication of all newspapers for two weeks. In April, the government issued a vaguely worded decree prohibiting the dissemination of pandemic-related information that would "cause panic." According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, four

journalists operating in Jordan were arrested for reporting or commenting on the ongoing pandemic as the year progressed, and two were still in custody at year's end.

The government also sought to restrict media coverage of other subjects as the year progressed. Immediately after the July 2020 closure of the country's Teachers' Syndicate, the attorney general issued a wide-ranging gag order prohibiting discussion of the subject. Human Rights Watch counted the detention—and subsequent release—of two journalists for reporting on the matter by late August, while two others were assaulted by authorities during that period.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

2 / 4

Islam is the state religion. The government monitors sermons at mosques for political, sectarian, or extremist content and issues prescribed texts and themes. Muslim clerics require government authorization to preach or dispense religious guidance. Many Christian groups are recognized as religious denominations or associations and can worship freely, though they cannot proselytize among Muslims. While converts from Islam are not prosecuted for apostasy, they face bureaucratic obstacles and harassment in practice. Unrecognized religious groups are allowed to practice their faiths but suffer from a number of disadvantages stemming from their lack of legal status. Atheists and agnostics are required to list a religious affiliation on government documents.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

2 / 4

Intelligence services reportedly monitor academic events and campus life, and administrators work with state officials to scrutinize scholarly material for politically sensitive content.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

2 / 4

Open discussion of topics such as politics, the monarchy, religious affairs, and security issues is inhibited by the threat of punishment under the various laws governing expression. The telecommunications law requires companies to enable the tracking of private communications upon the issuance of a court order, and authorities are allowed to order surveillance of people suspected of terrorism. Many Jordanians hold a long-standing belief that government agents routinely listen to their phone calls and monitor their online activities.

Under cybercrime legislation, internet users can face fines or prison terms as long as three months if they are convicted of defamation for online comments. A number of activists and protesters arrested in 2020 were charged with offenses related to social media posts in which they criticized the government.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0 / 4

Jordanian law limits free assembly. Authorities require prior notification for any demonstration or event and have broad discretion to disperse public gatherings. At times, the Interior Ministry cancels planned public events without advance notice or explanation. Violations of the law on assembly can draw fines and jail time. Security forces are known to engage in violent confrontations with protesters.

The government further restricted the right to assemble in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, it used the Defense Law to restrict public gatherings of more than 10 people, and later 20; restrictions on assembly persisted even after other measures were rolled back in June. Authorities used these powers to disperse demonstrations after the Teachers' Syndicate was closed in late July. Several dozen protesters were arrested in an Amman demonstration held several days after the union's closure, and some were physically attacked by police. Security forces similarly attacked participants of protests held in several cities in July and August. Some protesters were later pressured to sign pledges promising to refrain from further activity, under penalty of hefty fines. In addition, the authorities restricted Facebook Live, limiting the ability of social media users to view footage of the demonstrations.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the government used emergency powers to place strict limits on assembly, forcibly dispersed protests against the closure of the Teachers' Syndicate in July and August, and restricted communications services used to broadcast those protests.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	1 / 4
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While many local and international NGOs are able to operate in the country, there are significant restrictions on civil society. The Ministry of Social Development has the authority to deny registration and requests for foreign funding, and can disband organizations it finds objectionable. The ministry has broad supervisory powers over NGO operations and activities, and board members must be vetted by state security officials. In practice, these regulations are applied in an opaque and arbitrary manner.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	0 / 4
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Workers have the right to form unions, but only in 17 designated industries. Groups must obtain government approval and join the country's semiofficial union federation, the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU). The right to strike is limited by requirements for advance notice and mediation, and participants in an illegal strike are subject to dismissal. No new trade unions have been allowed to form in Jordan since 1976. Although the kingdom has agreed to many of the International Labour Organization's fundamental conventions, it has failed to ratify the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention of 1948.

In 2013, a dozen unofficial trade unions formed the Jordanian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FITU). Lacking official status, they are not allowed to establish headquarters, collect fees from their members, or engage in collective bargaining. They also face heavy pressure from the GFJTU and governmental bodies to cease their activities and shut down.

The Teachers' Syndicate began the longest public-sector strike in Jordanian history in September 2019, which ended after a deal was struck that October. The union later accused the government of reneging on the deal, with its leader criticizing then premier al-Razzaz in a July 2020 speech. Later that month, the government ordered a two-year closure of the syndicate, shuttering offices and arresting its 13-member board. Over 250 people were subsequently detained as protests opposing the shuttering continued through August. In late December, a court handed one-year sentences to five syndicate leaders and ordered the organization's permanent dissolution, though the defendants vowed to appeal and were bailed.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because authorities raided and closed the headquarters and branch offices of the teachers' union, jailed hundreds of its members in July and August, and ordered the organization's permanent dissolution in a December court ruling.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?**2 / 4**

The judiciary's independence is limited. Under 2016 constitutional amendments, the king unilaterally appoints the entire Constitutional Court and the chair of the Judicial Council, which nominates civil court judges and is mostly comprised of senior judiciary members. Judges of both the civil and the Sharia (Islamic law) courts—which handle personal status matters for Muslims—are formally appointed by royal decree. The Justice Ministry has the power to monitor judges, promote them, and determine their salaries, further weakening the branch's autonomy.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?****1 / 4**

Police can hold suspects for up to six months without filing formal charges, and governors are empowered to impose administrative detention for up to one year. In practice, the authorities often ignore procedural safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention, holding individuals incommunicado or beyond legal time limits. Criminal defendants generally lack access to counsel before trial, impairing their ability to mount a defense. Despite a constitutional prohibition, courts allegedly accept confessions extracted under torture.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?****2 / 4**

Torture and other mistreatment in custody are common and rarely draw serious penalties. Prison conditions are generally poor, and inmates reportedly suffer from beatings and other abuse by guards. Terrorist attacks remain a threat to physical security. In November 2019, Jordanian authorities said they had disrupted a plot to attack US and Israeli targets

in the country earlier in the year; two suspects who were allegedly inspired by the Islamic State militant group went on trial that month.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2 / 4

Women face discrimination in law and in practice. For example, women's testimony is not equal to men's in Sharia courts, and certain social benefits favor men over women. Jordanians of Palestinian origin are often excluded from jobs in the public sector and security forces, which are dominated by East Bank tribes. Discrimination against LGBT+ people is prevalent and includes the threat of violence, though consensual same-sex sexual activity is not specifically prohibited by law. The authorities have denied registration to NGOs that support LGBT+ rights.

Refugees and asylum seekers have not historically received permanent settlement in Jordan, though individuals residing in the country are usually allowed to remain while UN agencies seek their placement in third countries. Refugees often lack access to work permits, and work informally. Jordan is not a signatory to the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counted 752,000 refugees in Jordan in November 2020, and separately reported 662,000 hailing from Syria at the beginning of November. The government, which claims to host nearly double that number, has taken inconsistent steps in supporting this population; it agreed to issue 200,000 work permits in return for a loan-and-investment package in a 2016 compact, and reached the 190,000-permit mark in July 2020. In 2018, it legalized the status of several thousand Syrian refugees living outside of camps, but also prohibited refugees from accessing subsidized health care. Syrian refugees are at risk of refoulement, with at least 16 refugees forcibly transferred to the Rukban camp near the Syrian border in August 2020. Amnesty International reported that some refugees who arrived

there in July returned to Syria, while another was forcefully sent to territory controlled by Syrian authorities.

Citizens living in Jordan proper risk the arbitrary revocation of citizenship or documentation if they are of Palestinian descent.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

2 / 4

Jordanians generally enjoy freedom of domestic movement and international travel, though international flights were restricted between March and September 2020 due to COVID-19-related measures. Refugees and migrant workers face impediments to travel, and are often unable to change employers. Employers reportedly confiscate migrant workers' passports. Children of Jordanian mothers and non-Jordanian fathers, who lack citizenship themselves, have difficulty accessing jobs, education, and health care without a special identity card that is difficult to obtain.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

2 / 4

The legal framework generally supports property rights for citizens, but women do not have equal access to property under Sharia-based inheritance rules. Private business activity is hampered by obstacles such as corruption and the abuse of political or other connections.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2 / 4

Personal social freedoms are limited by the country's conservative culture and specific laws. The government does not recognize marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. Matters such as marriage and divorce are handled by religious courts, which place women and converts from Islam at a disadvantage and restrict some interfaith marriages. Women are not allowed to pass citizenship onto their children.

However, modest legal improvements have been enacted in recent years. In 2017, the parliament adopted legislation to better regulate the processing of domestic violence complaints. Other laws enacted that year abolished a penal code provision that allowed rapists to avoid punishment by marrying their victims. Reduced sentences are still possible for those who murder a spouse caught committing adultery, and spousal rape is not a crime.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

2 / 4

Migrant workers, who are the majority of the Jordanian garment industry's workforce, are especially vulnerable to exploitative labor practices. 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. Rules governing matters such as the minimum wage, working hours, and safety standards are not well enforced, particularly in certain sectors like agriculture and construction, and among migrant workers. The influx of Syrian refugees has exacerbated the situation by expanding the pool of laborers willing to work in the informal sector for low wages. According to official data from 2016, the number of child laborers in the country had doubled since 2007.



On Jordan

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

34/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

49/100 Partly Free

Other Years

2020

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