

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020 - JORDAN

PARTLY FREE

37

/ 100

Political Rights 12 / 40

Civil Liberties 25 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

37 / 100 Partly Free

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

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 2019

- Mass demonstrations against unemployment, stagnant or declining public-sector salaries, and corruption became common during the year, with teachers launching a month-long strike over wages in September. The increase in dissent prompted authorities to arrest dozens of activists.
- The government continued to issue work permits to Syrian refugees in keeping with a 2016 European Union funding agreement, with more than 153,000 distributed by October, though the presence of some 655,000 registered and many more unregistered Syrian refugees placed serious strains on the country's public services.

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

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. Omar al-Razzaz, a former World Bank economist and minister of education, was appointed prime minister in June 2018, replacing Hani al-Mulki, who resigned in the wake of mass protests over proposed tax

increases and hikes in fuel and electricity prices. 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.

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 of the district seats are reserved for religious and ethnic minorities.

In the 2016 elections for the House of Representatives, the first held under a new electoral system, the opposition Islamic Action Front (IAF)—the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan—participated after boycotting the previous two elections. It took 10 seats, and its allies won several more. However, as in past polls, most seats went to independents who are typically tribal figures and businesspeople and considered loyal to the monarchy. Vote buying and other forms of manipulation remained a problem.

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? 2 / 4

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. The 2016 reform to Jordan's election law introduced multiple-vote proportional representation for parliamentary elections, replacing a single nontransferable vote system that favored progovernment 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. However, even after the changes, rural and tribal voters, who make up the base of support for the regime, remain heavily overrepresented in the parliament. For example, 59,000 eligible voters in the district of Ma'an elect four members of parliament, whereas the first district of Zarqa, which is dominated by Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin, has over 450,000 voters electing six parliament members. The legal framework for elections is unstable, with major changes often introduced just a month or two before polling day, causing confusion that can hinder campaigning and voting.

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. The main opposition party, the IAF, is tolerated, although the offices of its parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, were forcibly shuttered in 2016 after the regime prevented it from holding internal elections. The previous year, the government licensed an offshoot group, the Muslim Brotherhood Society, and moved to invalidate the original organization's legal registration. The decision exacerbated preexisting divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood, which further weakened it politically.

The system favors tribally affiliated independents over political parties with specific ideologies and platforms, as does the patronage-based political culture. In the 2016 elections, only 215 of 1,252 candidates ran on behalf of specific parties, according to the IEC.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4

The Islamist opposition holds only about 12 percent of the lower house, and the political system—including the overrepresentation of rural voters—limits the ability of any party-based opposition to make significant gains. 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

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. 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, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

Women have equal political rights, and female candidates have won some 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. Five women won parliamentary seats outside the quota system in 2016, and four won off-quota seats on governorate councils in 2017. Women performed better at the municipal and local levels, but none won mayoral posts.

Nine seats in the House of Representatives 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 underrepresented in the political system.

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 Anticorruption Commission is tasked with investigating allegations. However, successful prosecutions—particularly of high-ranking officials—remain rare. Anticorruption efforts are undermined by a lack of genuinely independent enforcement institutions and restrictions on investigative journalism and civil society activism.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Laws governing access to government information 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

Jordan's 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 websites 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. In January 2019, the Court of Appeals confirmed the conviction of Nidal Salameh, a journalist for the Gerasa News website, who was sentenced to three months in prison for violating the Press and Publications Law and the Cybercrime Law through a 2015 article about a private hospital. In May 2019, two journalists with the television station Al-Urdun al-Youm were detained

after the station broadcast a segment that criticized the head of the gendarmerie. The two were released on bail but faced charges of slander.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and 2 / private? 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 2 / indoctrination? 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 2 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 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. A number of the activists and protesters arrested during 2019 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? 1 / 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 have in the past engaged in violent confrontations with protesters.

Coalitions of local activists known simply as the *hirak* (movement) mounted numerous demonstrations against unemployment, stagnant or declining public-sector salaries, and corruption

during 2019, criticizing the government's performance and calling for political and other reforms. The authorities often responded with arrests of key organizers, who faced charges such as insulting the monarch and undermining the political regime.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 1 / 4

While many local and international nongovernmental organizations (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? 1 / 4

Workers have the right to form unions, but only in 17 designated industries, and the 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 a federation, 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.

Teachers began the longest public-sector strike in the country's history in September, persisting for a full month until a deal was reached in October. They secured raises of between 35 and 75 percent for various educational posts.

F RULE OF LAW

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 2 / 4

The judiciary's independence is limited. Under the 2016 constitutional amendments, the king unilaterally appoints the entire Constitutional Court and the chair of the Judicial Council, which nominates judges for the civil court system and is made up mostly of senior members of the judiciary. Judges of both the civil and the Sharia (Islamic law) courts—which handle personal status matters for Muslims—are formally appointed by royal decree.

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 the 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 the rights of LGBT+ people.

According to the United Nations, there were more than 740,000 registered refugees in Jordan as of December 2019, including more than 655,000 from Syria, though the government has reported that the true figure may be double that number. Jordan does not accept refugees and asylum seekers for permanent settlement but typically allows those in the country to remain while UN agencies seek to place them in third countries. Most refugees lack access to work permits and instead work informally. In 2018, authorities started to grant legal status to refugees living outside of camps without permits, which reduced their risk of arrest and offered more employment and educational opportunities. Also that year, however, the government rescinded eligibility for subsidized health care for refugees living outside of camps. As of October 2019, Jordan had issued more than 153,000 of the 200,000 work permits for Syrian refugees called for in a 2016 European Union aid agreement.

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. Refugees, however, face impediments to their ability to travel and change employers, and there have been reports of employers confiscating the passports of foreign migrant workers. Women cannot pass

citizenship to their children, making it difficult for people with noncitizen fathers to access jobs, education, and health care without a special identity card that is often 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. 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 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.