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country summary

Jordan

In 2007 Jordan regressed in protecting the exercise of basic rights. A proposed NGO law would severely restrict freedom of association, and new laws on the press and on the right to information fell short of expectations. A new political parties bill threatened the existence of small parties by raising the required minimum number of founding members to 500, representing at least five governorates.

Municipal elections in July were marred by serious fraud, as documented by local civil society groups, including multiple voting and voter list manipulation. Parliamentary elections were held in November under the old electoral law, the government having not fulfilled a 2006 promise to reform it. The existing law favored pro-regime rural tribal regions against opposition strongholds in urban population centers.

Arbitrary Detention, Administrative Detention, and Torture

The General Intelligence Department (GID) arrests suspects mostly in the name of counterterrorism, sometimes without charge and frequently on spurious charges. Three security detainees—‘Adnan Abu Nujila, Samir al-Barq, and ‘Isam al-‘Utaibi (better known as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi)—have been held for years without trial. The GID routinely obstructs detainees’ access to legal representation and delays family visits. Security detainees as recently as 2006 have alleged torture and ill-treatment to extract confessions in the form of beatings and psychological abuse such as mock executions, sleep deprivation, and prolonged solitary confinement. Human Rights Watch inspected the GID facility from August 19 to 30, 2007.

In 2006 provincial governors administratively detained 11,597 persons without proof of criminal action or to circumvent the obligation to present suspects to the prosecutor within 24 hours. Administrative detainees must meet a financial bail

guarantee to gain release, but indigent detainees frequently resort to hunger strikes instead.

In April, and from June through August 2007, prison strikes and riots occurred. Reasons included withdrawal of visiting and book privileges, prolonged solitary confinement, delayed trials, and beatings. In visits to six regular prisons in August and October, Human Rights Watch found rampant beatings of inmates for perceived infractions of prison rules. Mass beatings took place in Swaqa prison on August 22, and in Swaqa, Qafqafa, and Juwaida prisons in June after a guard facilitated an escape. Any officers charged with abusing prisoners face an appointed police court instead of an independent regular court. Police officials prosecuting Aqaba prison guards for beating an inmate to death in May only upgraded charges from neglect of duty to murder following the intervention of King Abdullah II.

The GID offered the governmental National Center for Human Rights the same conditions of unannounced visits at any time and private interviews with detainees agreed with Human Rights Watch; at this writing this offer has not been taken up. The Public Security Directorate at times allowed the Jordanian Engineers' Association's Freedom Committee to visit imprisoned engineers.

Protective Custody of Women

Governors detain women—in one case for over 20 years—to protect them against family violence, instead of providing voluntary shelters. Between 400 and 800 women at risk are detained every year. The purpose of the first governmental women's shelter for victims of violence, which opened in 2007, is to reconcile the women with their family rather than offer protection. Judicial accountability for perpetrators of violence, or threats thereof, remains weak, although improved prosecutorial performance has secured convictions in 2007.

Freedom of Expression, Association, and Assembly

Criticisms of the king, government officials, and the intelligence forces are strictly taboo and carry serious penalties. Prosecutors also rely on the penal code to

criminalize speech diminishing the prestige of the state, and harming relations with other states.

The State Security Court in October found ex-parliamentarian and current head of the unlicensed Jordan National Movement Ahmad al-`Abbadi guilty of diminishing the prestige of the state for a web article alleging corruption by the interior minister and sentenced him to two years in prison; the court did not investigate the truth of the allegations. A royal court official said the government filed charges to avoid violence within the large `Abbadi tribe. Also in October the State Security Court sentenced Muhammad al-Zuhairi to 18 months in prison for *lese majeste* over online postings he had made.

Parliament reversed its initial position and agreed in March to a new press and publications law that dropped imprisonment as a sanction for breaching its requirement for “precision, neutrality and objectivity in presenting national material, human rights or the values of the Arab and Islamic nation,” among other provisions. The new law retains fines as high as 20,000 dinars (US\$28,000). In September the government announced that the law extended to material published on websites. Other laws retain imprisonment for prohibited speech, especially the penal code. Jordan also passed in April the Arab region’s first law on access to information, that experts criticized for allowing broad exclusions under the rubric of national security and for maintaining government control over any decision to release information

Foreign Minister Abd al-Ilah al-Khatib in January initiated a criminal defamation suit against weekly newspaper *al-Hilal*’s editor-in-chief Nasir Qamash and journalist Ahmad Salama. He objected to the content of a January article, and said his tribe had threatened to beat up Salama if he failed to take action. The case remains in the courts at this writing.

Since December 2006 parliamentarians or policemen have assaulted journalists on four occasions, and intelligence forces twice pre-censored media content, confiscating an Al Jazeera interview with Jordan’s Prince Hasan in April and in May stopping the weekly *al-Majd*’s publication of a plan to aid Palestine’s President Mahmoud Abbas.

In April the government passed a regulation bringing non-profit companies (primarily nongovernmental organizations (NGO) registered under the more permissive companies law) more in line with the stricter measures of the NGO law, giving the government the right to monitor their work and to dissolve them for minor breaches of their articles of association. In October the Cabinet proposed without broader consultation a new NGO law that is more restrictive than the current law. Foreign funding of NGOs or non-profit companies requires government approval under the new regulation and the proposed new law.

In July 2006 the Ministry of Social Development installed temporary government management of the Islamic Center Society, and led a massive recruitment of new members in 2007 to oust the Center's Muslim Brotherhood leadership in members' elections for a new management. By law these elections should have happened within two months of the appointment of a temporary management board. Similarly, the ministry in September 2006 installed temporary management at the General Union of Voluntary Services (GUVS), an NGO umbrella group, and in June 2007 at the Amman branch of GUVS. The new management postponed elections.

Jordan's restrictive law on public gatherings gives local governors the right to ban any meeting or demonstration, without having to provide a reason. In July, for example, Amman's deputy governor refused the `Afaf Society, run by a former three-time president of parliament, permission to hold a conference entitled "The Family is the Nursery of Values and Identity." In other examples, Amman's governor in May withheld permission for a rally that 28 opposition parties had planned to protest the new law on political parties and on several occasions he denied the student organization Dhabahtuna permission to demonstrate.

Iraqi Refugees

Jordan hosts at least 500,000 Iraqi refugees, the majority of whom arrived after 2003 (only Syria hosts a comparable number of Iraqis). After Iraqis killed 57 people in the Amman hotel bombings of November 2005, Jordan's traditional tolerance toward Iraqis eroded. Jordan's government, which does not have an established mechanism to determine refugee status, has practically shut its land borders and airport to

fleeing Iraqis, and continued in 2007 to deport visa overstayers despite official promises to recognize their right to stay. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Jordan greatly expanded its still inadequate provision of asylum seeker cards to Iraqis, but, in deference to the government, only exceptionally provides them with refugee documents. Ending its ban of prior years, Jordan admitted Iraqi children to public schools for the 2007-2008 school year.

Migrant Worker Rights

Reports documenting abuses of mostly Southeast Asian migrants working in Jordan's Qualified Industrial Zones led the government to shut down some factories, help transfer abused workers to other employers, and waive fines for visa overstayers. Nevertheless, there are few criminal prosecutions of abusive employers, and abusive conditions continue including beatings, long working hours, withholding of passports and paychecks, pay discrimination based on sex or nationality, preventing workers from leaving the work site at any time, and denying medical care. The provisions of Jordan's labor code, including the right to unionize, exclude non-Jordanians as well as agricultural and domestic workers. In early October the governor of Zarqa had Bangladeshi workers detained for striking.

Key International Actors

The United States gave Jordan US\$532 million in economic and security-related assistance in 2007 (compared to the European Union's €265 million for 2007-2010), praising Jordan's cooperation in the so-called global war on terrorism. US Ambassador David Hale was quick to praise Jordan's municipal elections, and a US congressional bill further praised these elections, causing disbelief among Jordanians who witnessed the electoral fraud.

The United Kingdom continues to try to return at least two Jordanians to Jordan, saying that it relies on a 2005 memorandum of understanding with Jordan to prevent torture, under which the government permits Adaleh, a Jordanian NGO with limited experience and little track record of criticizing the government, to monitor the treatment of a returned detainee.