

Title	Freedom in the World 2011 - Jordan
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Jordan
Publication Date	12 May 2011
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2011 - Jordan</i> , 12 May 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dcbf5195.html [accessed 23 May 2011]

Freedom in the World 2011 - Jordan

Capital: Amman

Population: 5,915,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

Jordan's royally appointed government ruled by decree for most of 2010, after the king dissolved the parliament in November 2009. During this period, several controversial measures were enacted, including a new election law that retained major structural flaws in the electoral system, and an information law regulating online outlets. The main Islamist opposition group boycotted parliamentary elections held under the new law in November 2010, resulting in an overwhelming victory for government supporters.

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 turbulent 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.

By the time Crown Prince Abdullah succeeded his father as king in 1999, the kingdom faced severe economic problems. The expected "peace dividend" from 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 activity were imposed after groups including 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*) against Israel that began in 2000.

In 2001, Abdullah dissolved the parliament, postponed elections scheduled for November, and replaced elected municipal councils with state-appointed local committees. He ruled by decree for over two years, issuing more than 200 "temporary laws" that weakened due process and restricted freedoms of expression and assembly.

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, and agreed to curtail their agitation against 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, for "threatening national security" ahead of 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 political party 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. While new elections would ordinarily be held within four months, the government postponed polls until November 2010, allowing it to rule by decree for a year. By August 2010, the government had promulgated 34 laws, including a new election law. The resulting elections were monitored by international observers and deemed to have been well conducted on a technical level, but the IAF boycotted them, citing structural biases that guaranteed the success of the king's traditional supporters.

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 National Assembly at his discretion. The lower house of the National Assembly, the Chamber of Deputies, is elected through universal adult suffrage. It 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.

The 2010 election law added 10 seats to the Chamber of Deputies, for a new total of 120. Four of the new seats represent urban districts, where most Jordanians of Palestinian origin reside. Nevertheless, the parliament remains heavily imbalanced in favor of rural districts, whose residents are generally of Transjordanian origin. The six other new seats are reserved for women, bringing the number set aside for women to 12. The Christian and Circassian minorities are guaranteed nine and three seats, respectively.

The new election law retains a voting system in which 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 new election law reinforced 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 individual candidates to engineer victories for themselves and their allies. As noncitizen residents, Jordan's roughly 600,000 refugees, overwhelmingly Palestinian, remain unable to vote.

The security forces, whose leadership generally excludes Jordanians of Palestinian descent, continue to exercise significant influence over Jordanian political life by limiting citizens' freedoms of speech and assembly.

Efforts to combat corruption in recent years have yielded mixed results. While officials have announced several investigations and arrests since an independent Anticorruption Commission (ACC) was established in 2007, these rarely lead to any serious punishment. The prime minister announced in January 2010 that the state would crack down on corruption, and in March police arrested four high-profile officials, including a former cabinet minister, on corruption charges. However, judicial authorities issued an order

that month instructing the media not to report on the case without permission. Jordan was ranked 50 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is restricted, and those who violate redlines regarding the royal family and certain societal taboos face arrest, causing widespread self-censorship. As in previous years, private citizens were arrested in 2010 for criticizing the monarch. A student was arrested in July for criticizing the king in an online chat with a friend, suggesting that the security services monitor such communications. Another student was arrested the same month for writing a poem that criticized the king, though he claimed not to have written it; authorities later confiscated his computer.

While imprisonment was abolished as a penalty for press offenses in 2007, journalists can still be jailed under the penal code. A study released in 2009 by the Amman-based Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists found that 43 percent of journalists admitted receiving some form of "incentive" from the government, while 94 percent said they practiced self-censorship. In February 2010, four journalists were referred to the state security court, three for electronic offenses. Two other journalists were held for 15 days each in February for criticizing the Jordanian intelligence service's cooperation with the CIA. In June, management changes at one of Jordan's independent newspapers were widely attributed to political pressure from the government.

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. Jordan's only independent satellite television channel, which was often under political pressure, declared bankruptcy in August 2010. Authorities are routinely tipped off about potentially offensive articles by informers at printing presses, editors are urged to remove such material, and intelligence agents often call journalists with warnings about their writing.

In January 2010, a court ruled that websites were subject to the press and publications law. Ambiguities in the court's ruling led the government to promulgate a new law governing websites in August. The measure was amended to delete the most egregious features several weeks after its initial approval, due to sustained criticism from local and international advocates for press and internet rights. The final version requires that police obtain a court order to search websites' offices. However, several vague provisions give considerable discretion to police, and the effects of the law will ultimately depend on how it is applied in practice.

Islam is the state religion. Christians are recognized as religious minorities and can worship freely, and 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 must obtain written government permission to lead services or teach the Koran. 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 and societal developments. However, certain limits remain in place, and there have been reports of a heavy intelligence presence on some university campuses. Islamist students were prevented from running in university elections at Hashemite University in April 2010, despite having met the necessary requirements.

Freedom of assembly is heavily restricted. Provincial governors often deny permission to hold demonstrations, particularly when organizers seek to criticize Jordanian-Israeli relations.

Freedom of association is limited. While many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are able to operate without running afoul of the authorities, the government is considering new rules that would severely limit their independence. The most controversial of these measures would allow the government to supervise NGO budgets, reject foreign funding, and veto individual programs. Though proposed in 2009, the

regulations remain stalled at the Ministry of Social Development. The government currently puts occasional pressure on NGOs' activities. In 2010, the state-sponsored National Center for Human Rights changed its official position on both the election law and the new information law after first announcing critical opinions.

Workers have the right to bargain collectively but must receive government permission to strike. More than 30 percent of the workforce is organized into 17 unions. In March 2010, teachers in a rural area struck unsuccessfully for the right to organize and were consequently subject to disciplinary measures. Day laborers in the public sector were arrested in May after they protested their dismissal. Labor rights organizations have raised concerns about poor working conditions in so-called 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. A 2001 decree allows the prime minister to refer any case to the SSC and denies the right of appeal to people convicted of misdemeanors by the SSC.

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. Even these protections are denied to suspects referred to the SSC, who 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. The UN special rapporteur on torture found in 2006 that "torture is systematically practiced" by the General Intelligence Department (GID), which interrogates suspects to obtain confessions in SSC cases. There is no independent complaint or monitoring mechanism for abuse in custody. Prison conditions are poor, and inmates are reportedly subject to severe beatings and other abuse by guards.

Freedom of movement and travel is generally respected. The size of the Iraqi refugee community, whose entry into Jordan is strictly limited, has decreased significantly in recent years.

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. Government pensions and social security benefits also favor men. Although women constitute only about 14 percent of the workforce, the government has made efforts to increase the number of women in the civil service. Women are guaranteed a quota of 12 seats in the lower house of parliament and, under the 2007 municipalities law, 20 percent of the seats in municipal councils. In November 2010, nine female senators were appointed to the upper house. 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. In practice, this provision is often applied to benefit men who commit "honor crimes" against women. In February 2010, a man was sentenced to 10 years in prison for murdering his sister in 2007; the court had originally ordered the death penalty but reduced its sentence when the victim's family dropped charges. In June, a man was arrested for allegedly shooting his 16-year-old niece 30 times after she was sexually assaulted. Between 15 and 20 such crimes occur in Jordan each year.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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