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## Freedom in the World - Jordan (2008)

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**Capital:**  
Amman

**Population:**  
5,700,000

**Political Rights Score: 5**  
**Civil Liberties Score: 4**  
**Status: Partly Free**

### Overview

**Jordan's parliament passed new legislation governing political parties in 2007, but key changes to the electoral law were not enacted, leaving reforms incomplete ahead of parliamentary elections in November. The Islamist opposition fared poorly in the balloting and accused the government of massive fraud, continuing an exchange of increasingly hostile rhetoric that had dominated the campaign period. Meanwhile, Jordan continued to face strains due to the influx of Iraqi refugees.**

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The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, known as Transjordan until 1950, was established as a League of Nations mandate under British control in 1921 and won full independence in 1946. Following the assassination of King Abdullah in 1951, the crown passed briefly to his mentally unstable eldest son, Talal, and then to his grandson, Hussein. King Hussein's turbulent 46-year reign featured a massive influx of Palestinian refugees (who now comprise a majority of the population), the loss of all territory west of the Jordan River in 1967, and numerous assassinations and coup attempts by Palestinian and Arab nationalists. Although the 1952 constitution provided for a directly elected parliament, political parties were banned in 1956, and the parliament was either suspended entirely or emasculated by government intervention in the electoral process. While political and civil liberties remained tightly restricted, Hussein proved adept at co-opting—rather than killing, jailing, or exiling—his political opponents. After economic austerity measures in the late 1980s sparked rioting and internal pressure for greater freedom and representation, the government launched a rapid process of political liberalization and progressively eased restrictions on civil liberties. However, the reform process ground to a halt in the mid-1990s and suffered some reversals.

By the time of Hussein's death in 1999 and the ascension of his son, Abdullah, the kingdom again 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. To deal with a crippling public debt and 27 percent unemployment, Abdullah began major economic reforms and signed one of the Arab world's first free-trade agreements with the United States. Meanwhile, additional restrictions on the media, public protests, and civil society activity were imposed after Islamists, leftists, and Jordanians of Palestinian descent mounted demonstrations in sympathy with the 2000 uprising in the West Bank and Gaza. The protesters demanded the annulment of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel.

In 2001, Abdullah dissolved the parliament, postponed elections scheduled for November, and replaced elected municipal councils with state-appointed local committees. For more than two years, he ruled by decree, issuing more than 200

“temporary laws” that weakened due process and restricted freedom of expression and assembly.

Although the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 further inflamed popular opposition to the kingdom’s foreign policy, Abdullah quickly moved to relax restrictions on freedom of expression and allowed reasonably free and transparent, though not fair, parliamentary and municipal elections that year. 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. alignment. This arrangement was contingent on continued economic progress, which was driven by a new infusion of “oil grants” from the Arab Gulf states and a dramatic increase in assistance from the United States.

Terrorist bombings struck Amman in November 2005, and Abdullah replaced his security advisers, dissolved the Senate, and appointed a new cabinet in 2006. In August of that year, the parliament approved a new antiterrorism law that criminalized financing, interacting with, and recruiting for any terrorist group. It also gave military courts jurisdiction over terrorism cases, and permitted surveillance of terrorism suspects and the detention of suspects for up to 30 days.

Also in 2006, the government released its National Agenda reform plan, which among other provisions called for the abolition of laws that discriminate against women and an update to association laws. The plan faced opposition from entrenched interests and a skeptical public that questioned the government’s commitment to implement it. There was progress in 2007 on new legislation governing political parties, but essential electoral reforms continued to stall.

In the run-up to municipal and parliamentary elections in July and November 2007, respectively, there was an increase in hostile rhetoric between the government and the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the main opposition movement. Security forces arrested nine IAF members between May and June for “threatening national security.” The IAF officially withdrew from the municipal polls on election day but won 2 out of the 965 contested seats. The party accused the government of using security personnel to manipulate the vote, while the government accused the Islamists of trying to undermine the elections.

The majority of parliament seats went to progovernment independents in the November 2007 parliamentary elections. Only 6 out of 22 IAF candidates won seats. The Amman-based al-Urdun al-Jadid Research Center reported significant electoral irregularities including vote buying and the use of improper identification by voters, though independent observers generally declared the elections free and fair. The authorities arrested two people for trying to buy votes. A new cabinet was sworn in on November 25, 2007, that included 13 first-time ministers and 4 women.

Jordan has been struggling to accommodate the huge influx of Iraqis fleeing violence in their home country. The authorities initially welcomed the mostly middle-class Iraqi refugees, who provided a boost to the Jordanian economy, but a massive increase in the number of Iraqis with lesser means has placed a strain on Jordanian resources and caused integration problems. Jordan has recently begun refusing Iraqi refugees at the border.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Jordan is not an electoral democracy. King Abdullah II holds broad executive powers, appoints the prime minister and cabinet, and may dissolve the National Assembly and dismiss the cabinet at his discretion. The 110-seat lower house of the National Assembly, elected through universal adult suffrage, may approve, reject, or amend legislation proposed by the cabinet, but is limited in its ability to initiate legislation. It cannot enact laws without the assent of the 55-seat upper house, or Senate, which is appointed by the king. Members of both houses serve four-year terms. Regional governors are appointed by the central government.

The electoral system is heavily skewed toward the monarchy's traditional support base. Voters are restricted to choosing a single candidate, as opposed to a party slate, in the 45 multiseat parliamentary districts. This favors tribal and family ties over political and ideological affiliations. In addition, rural districts with populations of Transjordanian origin are overrepresented relative to urban districts, where most Jordanians of Palestinian descent reside. Activists have repeatedly called for a new electoral law based on proportional representation, but the government did not act on its pledges to reform the law before the 2007 elections.

The parliament did pass a controversial political parties law in 2007, though it did not take effect until after the November parliamentary elections. It raised from 50 to 500 the number of members necessary for a party to register, and increased the number of districts from which those members must be drawn. Existing parties that failed to meet the new criteria would be banned. However, an independent judicial body, rather than the Interior Ministry, would grant party licenses. State funding would be distributed according to parliamentary representation, and parties would continue to be penalized for receiving foreign funding. The overall purpose of the law was to reduce fragmentation in politics, but reformists expressed concern that it could be used to limit legitimate opposition.

Parliament also passed a municipalities law in February 2007, stipulating that all mayors and local councils be elected, with the exception of Amman, where half of the council members would continue to be appointed by the central government. Under the existing system, half of all municipal council members had been appointed. The new measure also reserved a seat quota of 20 percent for women, and the age of eligible voters was reduced from 19 to 18.

Corruption persists in the executive and legislative branches of government, though the authorities have made progress in combating it in recent years. In September 2006, the parliament approved anticorruption legislation that would create a six-member commission, appointed by the prime minister, tasked with investigating graft. The government is sensitive to public charges of corruption. In July 2007, former lawmaker Ahmed al-Abbadi was charged in the State Security Court (SSC) with belonging to an illegal organization after he sent an e-mail to a U.S. senator accusing the Jordanian government of corruption. In October, Abbadi was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison for undermining the country's reputation, membership in an illegitimate organization, and distributing illegal pamphlets. Jordan was ranked 53 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is sometimes restricted. Vaguely worded legislation criminalizes criticism of the royal family, slander of government officials, and speech that harms foreign relations, enflames religious sensitivities, or undermines the state's reputation. In March 2007, the parliament took long-awaited steps to

amend the press and publications law, abolishing imprisonment as a penalty for press offenses. However, reporters still face fines of up to \$40,000. Other changes to the law eliminated previous censorship rules for books published in Jordan, but censors retained the power to ban imported volumes.

The government has issued several private broadcasting licenses, but most broadcast news media remain under state control. Satellite dishes are widespread, giving most Jordanians access to foreign media. Jordan's first private television station, ATV, was approved in late 2005 and was set to launch in early 2007, but was delayed because of financial troubles and wrangling over the station's administration. Plans for a new satellite station based in Amman were finalized in October 2007. There are dozens of private newspapers and magazines, but the government has broad powers to close print publications. In April 2007, authorities banned an edition of *Al-Majd* to suppress a story about a "secret plan" to oust the Hamas-led Palestinian government. Also in April, authorities seized a tape of an interview with Prince Hassan bin Talal—the king's uncle and a former heir to the throne—by Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television.

Authorities are routinely tipped off about potentially offensive articles by informers at printing presses, and editors frequently come under pressure to remove such material. Intelligence agents often telephone journalists with warnings about their writing. While the government denies restricting access to the internet, and in fact actively promotes it, websites airing critical views have been blocked in the past.

Islam is the state religion. Sunni Muslims constitute 92 percent of the population, but Christians and Jews are recognized as religious minorities and allowed to worship freely. Baha'is and Druze are allowed to practice their faiths, but are not officially recognized. The government appoints Islamic clergy, pays their salaries, and monitors sermons at mosques, where political activity is banned. A recent law regulating mosques requires mosques to require preachers to obtain written government permission to lead services or teach the Koran. Unauthorized preachers would face a month in prison and a fine. The parliament in 2006 approved a measure that allows only state-appointed councils to issue religious edicts, or fatwas, and makes it illegal to criticize these fatwas.

Academic freedom is generally respected. Jordanians are free to openly discuss political and societal developments, though there have reports of a heavy intelligence presence on some university campuses. In May 2007, 14 university professors affiliated with the opposition IAF party were dismissed from the University of Zarqa. The university president maintained that they were fired for academic reasons amid departmental restructuring.

Freedom of assembly is heavily restricted. The Law on General Assemblies bans public demonstrations lacking written authorization from the regional governor. The 2001 Law on Public Gatherings broadly defines public gatherings as any meeting between two persons, including those in a private home or office, and requires organizers to attain advance permission from governors who have the authority to prohibit them. Opposition groups have complained that most of their requests are denied. Freedom of association is limited. While dozens of licensed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate freely, the Ministry of Social Development occasionally withholds licenses from NGOs deemed subversive. There is a prohibition on NGOs participating in political activity. 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. The government has threatened to dissolve the Professional Associations Council (PAC), which has mounted protests in the past, and a draft law barring professional associations from engaging in politics is awaiting decision in parliament. In December 2007, the government removed the leadership of two large NGOs, the General Union of Voluntary Societies and the Islamic Center Society, accusing them of financial impropriety.

The judiciary is subject to executive influence through the Justice Ministry and the Higher Judiciary Council, whose members are appointed by the king. A number of judicial reforms were under discussion in 2007, though there has been no progress in efforts to establish a constitutional court. While most trials in civilian courts are open and procedurally sound, the State Security Court (SSC) may close its proceedings to the public. A temporary law promulgated in 2001 allows the prime minister to refer any case to the SSC and denies the right of appeal to people convicted by the SSC of misdemeanors, which can carry short prison sentences.

Jordanian citizens enjoy little protection from arbitrary arrest and detention. Under the constitution, 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. 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. Nearly every defendant tried by the SSC has claimed they were tortured.

Prison conditions are poor, and inmates are reportedly subject to severe beatings and other abuse by guards. A 2007 report by a coalition of Jordanian Islamists, professional syndicates, and Arab human rights organizations highlighted overcrowding and inadequate facilities. Capital punishment is legal, but the government announced in 2006 that it would no longer be imposed for a number of offenses, such as drug-related crimes. Death sentences continued to be issued for violent crimes and terrorism-related offenses.

Jordanians of Palestinian descent face discrimination in employment by the government and the military, and in admission to universities. Labor laws do not protect foreign workers. In July 2007, Jordan established new child-labor guidelines to abide by International Labor Organization conventions. Employment of children under 16 is illegal, but the rule is frequently violated. Freedom of movement and travel is generally respected, and there were no reports in 2006 of mothers being prevented from travelling alone with children.

Women enjoy equal political rights but face legal discrimination in matters involving inheritance and divorce—which fall under the jurisdiction of Sharia (Islamic law) courts—and child custody. Government pensions and social security benefits also favor men. However, new provisions within the National Agenda reform program aim to change this and abolish laws that are discriminatory toward women. Marital rape is not illegal, and there are no laws protecting women from domestic violence. A 2002 temporary law granting women the right to initiate divorce proceedings has been rejected repeatedly by the legislature, but remains in effect. Although women constitute only 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 six seats in the parliament and, under the 2007 municipalities law, 20 percent of the seats in municipal councils. Female participation in the latest elections was high. Though women have been judges since 1996, Ihsan Barakat was appointed as the first woman appeals court judge in May 2007. 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"—the murder or attempted murder of women by relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. In some cases, an administrative governor may incarcerate a woman for her "own protection" without benefit of due process; some women have spent years in prison because they have no safe alternative.