

Virus, social order, and elections in Jordan

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For research on the general elections in Jordan, the author arrived at Queen Alia Airport in early November. Upon arrival, the author encountered the unfamiliar combination of masked airport staff and friendly soldiers asking all passengers to make a queue for the pre-reserved PCR test. Compared with this complicated process, immigration clearance was simple in that it merely asked passengers to disclose the purpose of their visit and the place of accommodation. Nobody greeted us at the arrival gate. Taking the pre-booked car to central Amman, the author started a week-long self-quarantine in a spacious hotel room. That is the updated experience of entry into Jordan.

Many thought by the end of summer 2020 that the COVID-19 control strategy in Jordan was relatively successful. The government had ordered a series of strict lockdowns, movement restrictions, and border closure since the first outbreak in Europe, as a result of which the kingdom saw less than a dozen infected cases on a daily basis, most of whom were returnee students or immigrant workers. In September, the government decided to reopen the borders and schools carefully. Ironically, the first outbreak in Jordan hit the kingdom on its way to normalisation. The infection surged in densely populated areas, particularly the metropolitan area and the northern cities close

to Syria, and the number of infected jumped to thousands per day.

During the author's stay in Amman, the average number of newly infected individuals per day was between 3,000 and 6,000. As of 15 December, the kingdom, whose population is roughly a tenth of Japan's 125 million population, had over 260,000 cases in total. Socio-economic activities are allowed, but the curfew every



The Boulevard Mall in central Amman under lockdown.

night and on Fridays has been continued. The colourful posters of the smiling election candidates dominated every corner of Amman, but they could not organise meetings with supporters. On the other hand, the candidates' highly visible Facebook accounts, superficially speaking, were busy, getting hundreds of thousands of unidentified visitors.

Jordan is categorised as a monarchical authoritarian state, and the country's pro-Hashemite bureaucratic and military elites form the supportive pillar of the regime. The government has opened the lower house to every Jordanian since the 1989 political reform, although this is considered a subordinate institution compared with the cabinet and the upper house appointed by the King. The 1989 elections were held under the large-constituency multi-voting system to ensure that minor candidates and urban political parties including the leftists had a chance to win. It was the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the largest Islamist group and perhaps the most powerful social force in the kingdom, that emerged as the single largest bloc in the lower house between 1989 and 1997, but it fell short of majority. The government's peace agreement with Israel in 1994, which sparked a controversy in Jordan, made the MB and its affiliate, the Islamic Action Front Party (IAF), which had wide support from the Palestinian-Jordanians, to walk away from the dialogue with the government. The MB and most of the opposition also criticised the amendment of the election law in 1993 to introduce a single-seat constituency system because it would simply increase the number of local pro-government MPs. The minor political parties disappeared from

the lower house after the 1993 elections.

Therefore, it was not surprising that the reintroduction of the large-constituency multi-voting system was partly a result of the reconciliation between the government and the opposition amid the Arab Spring in 2011. On the other hand, the MB, which was dominated by hardliners, missed the opportunity to control the democratisation movement and compromise with the government. The collapse of MB affiliate Muhammad Mursi's administration in Egypt in 2013 and the growth of the Islamic State provided an opportunity for the Jordanian government to restrict the activities of the MB at home, which resulted in the arrest of its vice supreme guide in 2014. The new voting system was fully implemented in the 2016 elections. A new rule asking each candidate to represent a party or list (qāima) gave rise to dozens of new parties, but most of them merged into some blocs after the elections. The battered MB had to observe the split election campaigns conducted by the IAF and the new party formed by expelled MB members. This was the outcome of the 2016 elections.

The novel coronavirus was powerful enough to halt these small but notable signs of democratic progress in Jordan following the Arab Spring uprising. In July 2020, the Attorney General revoked the licence of the Teachers Association, a formerly illegal professional association that had won legal status in 2011, because it had violated the gathering restriction order amid the lockdown. At the same time, the court order to dissolve the MB, which was reported by state news agency PETRA the same month, was viewed as part of the

government's penalising act. The MB, however, officially denied its breakup.¹

Under such circumstances, how did 1674 candidates and 35 parties contest for 130 congress seats? Simply stated, the keyword of the 2020 election campaign was the lack of issue. It was understandable that nobody could publicly criticise the government under the emergency as epidemic prevention took priority over everything else. The IAF lined up 41 candidates, the biggest number among all parties. The National Renaissance Front Party listed 31, the Islamic Wasat Party 20, and Zamzam 17. It was striking that for these Islamist parties, Islam was not the prime issue of their manifesto. Even the IAF, once thought of as

the vanguard of opposition, released an ordinary manifesto, particularly with respect to its economic policy.² Its decision to form a coalition list in the elections called 'Reform' in association with the Christians and Circassians in the metropolitan area also restricted the promises and actions of the IAF. COVID-19 negatively affected voters' behaviour. According to a pre-election survey by the Al-Hayat Center, only 33.7% of the respondents said they would vote, while 19.8% were not sure. In another poll, 51% of the sample said that the elections should be postponed.³

The elections were held on 10 November as planned. That night, the Independent Election Commission announced that the voting rate was 29.9%.⁴ The low voting rate helped candidates from specific tribes in rural areas and ethnoreligious groups such as those from the 'Reform' list. It is too early to conclude that these lukewarm election results reflect apathy. However, we may not see high political drama in the incoming lower house session, except for discussions on the coronavirus pandemic.

The government imposed a four-day long nationwide curfew from the day after the elections. Frequent stay-at-home orders and the dearth of foreign tourists have devastated the already troubled restaurant and tourism businesses, making it increasingly difficult for them to hire. In contrast to the silence over the national elections, the Jordanian government closely followed the results of the U.S. presidential elections. King Abdullah tweeted his congratulations to the winner, Joe Biden, ahead of other Arab leaders. King



Campaign posters in Abdali, Amman.

Abdullah was also the first Arab leader to receive a phone message from Biden after his victory, with the U.S. President-elect expressing support for the two-state solution to the Palestine Problem. These words of support are important for Jordan because the Middle Eastern Peace Process regime since the 1990s has provided Jordan relatively high diplomatic power as the mediating actor between the Palestinian, Arab, and Western stakeholders.

As the kingdom is home to millions of Palestinian Jordanian and Palestinian refugees, the Jordanian government has strongly opposed the ongoing bilateral normalisation talks between Israel and the GCC states, which are backed by the Trump administration in disregard of the Palestinian National Authority and Jordan. This may have an impact on the international consensus on the two-state solution. In the 1990s, the government intervened in the lower house and restricted the media and social movements to end the state of war with Israel. Now, all the relevant actors in Jordan, including the government, are challenged by the new peace 'deal'.

The 2020 elections were held amid the coronavirus crisis. In other words, the event was obscure and happened during a blank period in politics. When the fog retreats, the newly elected MPs who constitute three-fourth of the members may realise that the world has changed –lifestyle changes at the least, recession without a doubt, and possibly changed rules of the game in the peace process. The virus poses an equal threat to everybody, but the post-COVID-19 socioeconomic challenges will be distributed unequally across the

kingdom. At any rate, Jordan is already in transition. This was the conclusion from this field trip.

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1. For details, see the MB's webpage (<https://ikhwanjo.net/?p=11674>, accessed on 16 July 2020).
 2. Hizb Jabha al-'Amal al-Islāmī. 2020. 'Waraqā Siyāsa Iqtaṣādiya'.
 3. *Jordan Times*, 28 September 2020 (<http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/majority-citizens-favour-postponing-elections-%E2%80%94-survey>, accessed on 1 October 2020).
 4. *Jordan Times*, 11 November 2020 (<http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/parliamentary-elections-conclude-299-cent-voter-turnout>, accessed on 24 November 2020).

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