

Jordan

Country:

[Jordan](#)

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

5

Aggregate Score:

36

Freedom Rating:

5.5

Overview:

The economic, social, and security implications of the conflict in neighboring Syria continued to take a toll on Jordan, straining state resources and public services. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were close to 700,000 registered refugees in the country by year's end, in addition to hundreds of thousands of unregistered persons of concern. National security concerns remained prevalent during the year, and the government continued implementing stronger policies against terrorism, including by prosecuting militants upon return from fighting with extremist groups abroad. Some 2,000 Jordanians have left to fight with such groups, particularly the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Nusra Front.

In a small step toward reform, legislators discussed a draft electoral law that proposes abolishing Jordan's "one man, one vote" system. Separately, a new Law on Political Parties overhauled the framework for party formation and operation, including by forbidding the creation of parties based on ethnicity and religion, among other factors.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 11 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

King Abdullah II holds broad executive powers, appoints and dismisses the prime minister and cabinet, and may dissolve the bicameral National Assembly at his discretion. Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour and his cabinet were nominated by the parliament before their appointment. Legislative representatives in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house, are elected through

universal adult suffrage. The Senate is appointed by the king and constitutes the upper house. The central government appoints regional governors.

The 2012 Election Law granted voters two ballots in parliamentary elections: One vote is cast for a party list in which candidates are selected through proportional representation in a single nationwide constituency, competing for 27 seats. Another candidate is selected through a single nontransferable vote system (SNTV) based on local electoral districts, competing for 108 seats. The remaining 15 seats are reserved for women. Political parties have long criticized the SNTV system for favoring progovernment tribal elites.

Elections to the lower house in 2013 were the first under the new law. The elections were carried by Transjordanian (East Bank) tribal elites and independent businessmen loyal to the regime. Twenty-two small parties won the 27 seats on the national level. The Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, boycotted the vote. International observers noted instances of vote buying and criticized the electoral framework as unfair.

In August 2015, legislators began discussing new electoral legislation that aims to create a completely proportional system. The proposal reduces the size of the lower house from 150 to 130 members but retains the use of quotas for ethnic and religious minorities as well as for women, with at least one female seat per district—a higher proportion of representation given the decreased number of seats. Opposition figures and groups had mixed reactions to the proposal, welcoming the abolishment of the SNTV but also criticizing the draft legislation for not going far enough in electoral reform; many of them called on legislators to vote against the proposal. The bill had not been adopted at year's end.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 6 / 16

The party system, consisting of just over 30 registered parties, is not robust. Although Jordanians are free to join political parties, votes are cast along nonpartisan and tribal lines in practice. In June 2015, the lower parliamentary house endorsed a bill on political parties that extensively changed the definition, registration, and supervision of parties; the king ratified the legislation in September. Among other things, the new Political Parties Law reduced the threshold of members required for registration from 500 to 150 and barred the founding of a party based on religion, ethnicity, race, or gender, stipulating that parties should be formed on the basis of citizenship and equality. The legislation granted authority to license and supervise parties to the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs, rather than the Ministry of Interior, at least nominally moving the process away from potential interference by security services. Islamist parties voiced fears that the restriction on foundational ideologies could be used against them, but officials made assurances that the provision would not retroactively apply to existing parties.

Flaws within the electoral law and gerrymandering in favor of East Bank tribal elites prevent genuine or competitive political process. The Chamber of Deputies is heavily imbalanced in favor of rural districts, whose residents are generally of East Bank origin. Urban areas, where Palestinian-Jordanians and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood are heavily concentrated, account for more than two-thirds of the population but less than one-third of deputies. The IAF boycotted both the 2010 and 2013 elections to protest inherent disadvantages in the system.

Electoral law guarantees nine seats in the Chamber of Deputies for Christians and a combined three seats for Circassian and Chechen minorities.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

Key powers and decision-making abilities are ultimately vested in the king. The Chamber of Deputies may approve, reject, or amend legislation proposed by the cabinet, but it cannot enact laws without the assent of the royally appointed Senate. King Abdullah is empowered to dismiss parliament as well as the prime minister and cabinet. The king can delay parliamentary elections for up to two years and may rule by royal decree during periods in which parliament is not in session. Civil society groups have complained about a lack of inclusion in policymaking, particularly in deliberations over the amendments to the Press and Publications Law. Disputes between parliamentarians have resulted in physical scuffles in years past.

The government has undertaken some efforts to combat widespread corruption. Prime Minister Ensour launched a five-year anticorruption strategy in 2013. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is empowered to investigate allegations, while the Privatization Review Committee was formed in 2013 to review the privatization of state-run enterprises. The ACC stated in an October 2015 report that it had received 1,155 corruption complaints in 2014, investigated 151 cases, and recovered approximately \$24 million in funds and \$1 million in real estate. However, weak investigative journalism, limited access to information, and a lack of institutional checks and balances have prevented significant action. Jordan ranked 45 out of 168 countries and territories in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Government officials are sometimes held accountable for their wrongdoings. In May 2015, the Interior Minister resigned and two police chiefs were forced into retirement over human rights abuses in prisons and a heavy-handed crackdown in the restive southern city of Ma'an.

Civil Liberties: 25 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16

Freedom of expression is restricted by numerous laws that criminalize defamation, the denigration of government, and the incitement of sectarian strife. Journalists have been arrested for criticizing the king, exposing corruption, and violating a vague provision in the Press and Publications Law mandating media objectivity. The government engages in direct censorship and pressures editors to control content. Self-censorship is pervasive, particularly in reporting on the royal family, foreign leaders, and certain societal taboos.

While there are dozens of private newspapers and magazines, the government has broad powers to close them and often engages in prepublication censorship of news stories. Most broadcast news outlets remain under state control, but satellite dishes and the internet provide access to foreign media. Journalists continue to face intimidation, arrest, and even imprisonment for writing unfavorable articles, especially when reporting on national security matters. Among other cases in 2015, security forces arrested two editors from the online platform Saraya News in January in connection to an article that allegedly contained inaccurate information about a prisoner exchange between IS and the Jordanian government. They were charged with supporting terrorism and disseminating false news but released on bail in March.

The authorities restrict access to the internet and often pressure websites to remove content, particularly unfavorable coverage. The government blocked approximately 300 news websites in 2013 over failure to meet stringent new registration requirements. Almost all have since become accessible after obtaining the proper registration and licenses, but some continue to operate without a license by using alternative domains.

Citizens can face retribution for views shared on social media. In February 2015, the State Security Court (SSC) convicted a senior politician on the charge of harming relations with a foreign state, an

offense under Jordan's antiterrorism law, in connection to a Facebook post criticizing the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The court sentenced him to 18 years in prison.

Islam is the state religion, but Christians are recognized as a religious minority and can worship freely. Baha'is and Druze are allowed to practice their faiths as well, though a lack of state recognition has resulted in de facto discrimination. The government monitors sermons at mosques, and preachers cannot practice without written government permission. Only state-appointed councils may issue religious edicts, and it is illegal to criticize these rulings. Political, sectarian, and extremist speech are outlawed at mosques under the Preaching and Guidance law, and several imams have been banned for pro-IS sermons.

Academic freedom is generally respected, although there have been reports of a heavy intelligence presence on some university campuses. Jordanians openly discuss political developments within established red lines.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

Prior permission is not required to stage a public gathering. Allegations that the gendarmerie employed excessive force during a 2014 demonstration over the killing of a Jordanian-Palestinian judge have not been properly investigated.

While many international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are able to operate without significant hindrance, there are several restrictions on freedom of association. The Ministry of Social Development has the authority to deny registration as well as requests for foreign funding, and can disband organizations it finds objectionable. NGOs are prohibited from supporting political organizations. The Ministry of Social Development has broad supervisory powers over NGO operations and activities, and all board members must be vetted by state security. The law on associations includes penalties of up to 10,000 dinars (US\$14,000) for violations. Several NGOs reported being denied access to foreign funding in 2015.

Workers have collective bargaining rights but must receive government permission to strike. Labor legislation defines 17 sectors in which workers may form a union. In October 2015, security forces forcibly dispersed a sit-in by port workers in the governorate of Aqaba. A local labor rights NGO reported that more than 20 participants were arrested.

F. Rule of Law: 6 / 16

The judiciary is subject to executive influence through the Ministry of Justice and the Higher Judiciary Council, most of whose members are appointed by the king. Provincial governors can order administrative detention for up to one year under a 1954 Crime Prevention Law that leaves little room for appeal. Prison conditions are poor, and inmates reportedly undergo severe beatings and other abuse from guards. Torture allegations are rarely prosecuted or result only in minor disciplinary penalties.

While most trials in civilian courts are open and procedurally sound, the quasi-military SSC may close its proceedings to the public. In early 2014, the government limited the jurisdiction of the SSC to high crimes of espionage, drugs, terrorism, treason, and currency counterfeiting. However, 2014 amendments to the 2006 antiterrorism law broadened the law's scope to include nonviolent offenses, such as using information networks to support, promote, or fund terrorism, as well as acts to harm Jordan's relations with a foreign country, which is also an offense under the penal code. In 2015, the SSC continued to hear cases against individuals suspected of belonging to IS and other

extremist groups. In February, after IS militants published a video showing the immolation of a captured Jordanian pilot, the authorities executed two Iraqi militants. IS had previously sought the release of one of the militants, failed suicide bomber Sajida al-Rishawi.

Jordanians of Palestinian origin are marginalized from jobs in the public sector and security forces, which are dominated by East Bank tribes. Discrimination against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people is also prevalent. Consensual same-sex sexual activity is not accepted in Jordan's conservative society, though it is not prohibited by law. Activists fighting for LGBT rights face pressure from the secret police. In 2009, the Ministry of Social Development rejected an application to establish an NGO supporting LGBT rights on the basis that it would "violate the public morals and decency," and attempts to register others have failed since.

As of the end of 2015, UNHCR reported close to 700,000 registered refugees in Jordan, at least 630,000 of them from Syria alone. While Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention related to the status of refugees, the government adheres to an agreement with UNHCR by which refugees can remain in Jordan while the agency seeks more permanent solutions. Refugees are only legally permitted to work inside camps, although the majority live and work in cities. Poor living conditions and restrictions on freedom of movement led to violent riots at the Zaatari camp in 2014. Refugees have been turned away from public schools due to overcrowding, despite their right to free education. There have been reports of border authorities rejecting unmarried Syrian men of military age or refugees of Palestinian origin, which violates international norms on nonrefoulement. In some cases, Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship who reenter the country from Syria, having left in the 1970s, have been denied entry or stripped of their citizenship.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16

Jordanians enjoy freedom of domestic movement and international travel. There have been reports of authorities denying refugees the right to travel and of employers confiscating the passports of foreign migrant workers. Under a 2013 law, women are no longer required to obtain their husbands' permission when applying for a passport.

Jordan was ranked 113 out of 189 economies in the World Bank's 2016 *Doing Business* report, which noted obstacles in obtaining credit, protecting minority investors, enforcing contracts, and resolving insolvency.

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. In the 2013 elections, women represented 13 percent of all candidates.

In 2014, the government announced that children of Jordanian mothers and foreign fathers will be able to access free public services such as education, private property ownership, and greater employment opportunities, but will still be barred from full citizenship. A woman who suffers domestic abuse is often placed in administrative detention and can only be released when a male member of her family gives assurances that she will not be harmed. Spousal rape is not illegal, and men who commit "honor crimes" against women receive lenient sentences. Women's rights activists have staged campaigns against honor killings and a penal code provision that allows alleged rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims. According to a local NGO, at least a dozen honor killings took place in 2015, along with several attempts. Although the legal age of marriage is 18, girls as young as 15 years old can be married if a Sharia court allows it. A 2013 report by the Chief Islamic Justice Department showed that more than 10 percent of all marriages from 2000 to 2013 involved girls under the age of 18.

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. Jordan is a destination and transit country for human trafficking for forced labor and, to a lesser extent, prostitution.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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