

The Washington Post

## The pandemic compromised Jordan's parliamentary elections

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On Nov. 10, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan held parliamentary elections. Despite the nation's rising numbers of covid-19 cases, Jordanians weren't offered the chance to vote early or remotely. As a result, many asked whether voting was worth the risk of infection. Before ballots were cast, social media hashtags saying, "Boycott the elections for the sake of your lives," trended in the kingdom.

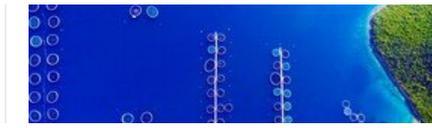


© Muhammad Hamed/Reuters Children pose as they search for wood in parliamentary candidates' posters on Nov. 12 after parliament elections results were announced in Amman, Jordan.

The pandemic did more than endanger voters' safety. It undercut the election's integrity. Turnout fell from 36 percent in the preceding election to 29 percent this time. Candidates were uncertain about whether elections would be held and thus whether they should launch their campaigns. And it created new opportunities for corruption and electoral manipulation. As a result, this was one of the least democratic elections in Jordan's recent history.

### Why hold elections during a pandemic?


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clearly explained why it did not do the same. The chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) noted that because covid-19 was not going away soon, there was no benefit to delaying the

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effects on confidence in the government, the regime may also have felt it needed to demonstrate its effectiveness, reinforce respect for state institutions and project stability. As the interior minister put it: Holding elections as planned would prove to everyone "the strength" of the Jordanian state.

The legislature doesn't have key decision-making powers — in fact, the government made all its covid-19 decisions without consulting the institution. Parliamentarians are instead focused on the prestige and access to resources that come with a seat. They can make and maintain prominent connections; secure lucrative public contracts for their friends; and direct local development projects to their constituencies. The monarchy's historically loyal tribal constituencies are overrepresented — and their districts always have the highest voter turnout. Some even rotate incumbency among tribal branches — a game of musical chairs that could be politically perilous for the regime to pause.

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### The road to elections amid covid-19

Jordan kept the pandemic under control for months by imposing some of the strictest public health measures in the world. When the election was announced at the end of July, the country had only around 1,200 covid-19 cases in a population of 10 million. Nevertheless, the IEC introduced a number of safety measures for voting, including mandatory masks and gloves and restrictions on how many people could enter polling stations at one time.

When first prescribed in August, these measures were appropriate. But by the day before the election, infections surged to 104,658 active cases. The regime was oscillating between a confusing array of responses: allowing business as usual, imposing curfews and enforcing full lockdowns.

### Campaign complications

During the run-up to the election, rumors circulated that it might be delayed. Not until Nov. 1 did the government affirm it would be held as planned. Many candidates complained that they did not know whether to spend campaign funds or wait. As a result, some campaigns weren't officially launched until just days before the vote.

As happened elsewhere, the pandemic forced campaigns online. This exacerbated existing problems with the way Jordan elects its legislature. The country's political environment is characterized by various, often overlapping cleavages: regime loyalists vs. the opposition; Jordanian-Jordanian vs. Palestinian-Jordanian origin identities; Islamists vs. secularists; hundreds of competing tribes; Muslims, Christians and Circassians.



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ballot. Voters then select a list and their preferred candidates within this list. The 2016 elections showed that this system makes it difficult for any single list to win more than one seat per district. Since only the top candidate is likely to win, list members have incentives to discourage their voters from supporting their list

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Online, candidates couldn't monitor whether their fellow list members were campaigning for the entire list or just for themselves. As a result, candidates began promoting themselves as individual candidates.

Government interference also weakened the lists, perhaps because fewer international observers attended the election. In non-pandemic times, hundreds of election observers arrive from countries upon which Jordan depends for aid — and afterward publish in-depth reports. Ahead of the election, the IEC chairman said that the 2020 election would not be like that held in 2007, when the head of Jordanian intelligence publicly claimed to have hand-selected many candidates.

But Jordanians have been drawing comparisons to 2007 nevertheless. A number of candidates stated that they faced pressure to leave specific lists or move to others, including those affiliated with the monarchy's most prominent opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Action Front (IAF). The IAF's electoral coalition united not just Islamists but also Christians, Circassians and women under its name of "Islah," or reform. Days before the election, many of Islah's candidates dropped out of its lists, which the IAF blamed on state interference.

The pandemic had pushed unemployment up to 23 percent. The government announced that after the election, Jordan would go into lockdown for four days, shutting down work for millions of laborers who couldn't afford to lose a day's wage. As a result, many candidates openly paid for votes. Local election monitors reported a number of "vote-buying bazaars," as one campaign manager called them.

The divisive electoral system allows seats in some districts to be won with just over 2,000 votes. This means vote buying can be very effective.

## The results

Given this troubled process, it's no surprise that wealthy business executives and tribal independents dominated, while strong, reform-oriented members of parliament lost their seats. Broader-based coalitions fared poorly. Less than 10 percent of the 130 members of the next parliament will be from political parties. The most influential opposition party, the IAF, lost almost half of its seats. No women were elected beyond the 15-seat quota allotted them, though five had done so in the last election. Only 15 percent of those elected are under 40. The incoming parliament will likely be as weak and as questionably legitimate as the process through which it was selected.

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*Kristen Kao (@kristenkao) is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Program on Governance and Local Development at the University of Gothenburg.*