

Disproportionate democracy

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Heavyweights and wealthy Jordanian businessmen won elections marred by tribalism and vote-buying. **Oula Farawati** reports

Official numbers showed a low general turn-out of around 54 per cent of eligible voters, with the lowest voting witnessed in Amman's various districts and the highest in villages and Bedouin districts. About 2.4 million Jordanians, out of some 3.4 million eligible to vote, registered for the elections, the second under the reign of the reform-minded King Abdullah.

As was widely expected, the results showed a setback for Islamists who fielded 22 candidates under their long-time slogan "Islam is the solution". They won eight seats and lost some key strongholds in several districts especially in Zarqa and east Amman. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) accused the government of rigging the elections by allowing a "number of army men" to vote and failing to stop widespread vote-buying and multiple voting.

"Many under-age [18-years] people voted in some stations. Many people were also allowed to vote although the polling station is not typed on their IDs," IAF spokesperson Jameel Abu Baker said during a press conference.

Analysts said the government is reluctant to carry out promised improvements to the electoral code because of its fear that the IAF, which is linked to Hamas through the international Muslim Brotherhood, might witness the success Hamas had in the elections last year.

In the 2003 parliament, the movement won 17 seats after fielding a full slate of 30 candidates. The IAF had said the system is designed to ensure they never get close to power.

But analysts argued that the movement has lost some of its popularity in Jordan after failing to meet people's demands. "People have given the movement their trust one parliament after another but they were too weak to carry out their programme, especially after the deterioration in their relationship with the government," one analyst close to Islamists said.

He added that the movement also suffered internal problems over who should run as IAF candidates which became public and affected their image.

The government announced that it had foiled two attempts at vote-buying on Tuesday. But according to observers and several citizens, vote-buying was rife all around the kingdom.

"I gave my vote in exchange for JD10. I voted and all my sisters did and we went back home with JD40 in total," a Jordanian woman, speaking on condition of anonymity, said. She cast her vote in Amman's 1st district.

Many of the heavyweights retained their seats in the 110- seat assembly. Surprisingly, some of the strong candidates failed to make a comeback.

"Saad Hayel Srour, Hashim Al-Dabbas and Abdullah Akayleh did not make it. Obviously, lack of money was the main factor," Jihad Mansi, a Jordanian reporter specialised in parliamentary issues told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

The family factor also is a problem, since people tend to vote along family and tribal lines rather than according to the candidate's platform. After leaving the polling station in Amman's high-end Khalda neighbourhood, Muna Abu Hdeib said she cast her vote for her cousin, Mohamed Abu Hdeib, who won this year's and previously the 2003 elections. "I voted for him because I have a tribal obligation towards him. We are related and he helped us a lot during the last parliament," she said.

Rowaida Abu Hdeib who also voted for the same candidate said she came to the polls under family pressure. Though she voted, she said she did not believe parliament can be of any help to the society. "No deputy has helped us. It is all talk, talk, talk, and no one does anything. I don't know. No one is good and all the candidates for me are the same," she said.

The one-man, one-vote electoral code allocates a disproportionate number of seats to sparsely populated rural areas of the country that are controlled by tribes traditionally loyal to the system. Christians, women and some ethnic minorities (Chechens, Circassians) are also guaranteed seats, while urban centres such as Amman and neighbouring Zarqa, where Jordanians of Palestinian origins live and the liberals and Islamists have their base, are severely under-represented.

Mowaffaq Malkawi, a journalist, decided to boycott the elections. He said the system according to which the elections are held is meant to sideline Jordanians of Palestinian origins. He believes this was unfair since those make up around half of the Jordanian population. The system also allocates a fewer number of seats to candidates from refugee camps than to candidates from other tribally-dominated areas of the kingdom.

"Of course I boycotted the elections. I boycotted them because of the one-man, one-vote elections system which is backward and unfair and was enacted to prevent most of the Jordanian society from having a fair representation," Malkawi said.

Jordanian political analyst Mahmoud Rimawi said voters were disillusioned by the ineffectiveness of parliament and by their inability to participate in the Jordanian political process. "The Jordanian democratic experience which started in 1989 should have developed and matured. The government is to blame for the one-man, one-vote formula. Also people are reluctant to vote and push for change. Our society has become negative," Rimawi told the *Weekly*.

The agenda of the upcoming parliament is full of thorny political and economic issues currently affecting Jordan. The assembly will have to deal with a looming government decision to "float" the prices of oil derivatives, which have long been subsidised. The house will also face another decision by economic-reform supporters in the government to lift government subsidies on bread in light of sky-rocketing wheat prices internationally. An imminent decision by the Social Security Corporation to increase the retirement age is expected to be the subject of heated discussion.

"The problem is that we do not expect a quality parliament because all the candidates are either tribal candidates or individuals seeking power and prestige, not political change and reform, so we do not expect a lot from them," Rimawi said.

Politically, the assembly will face the repercussions of hot issues starting with the Arab-Israeli conflict, the political chaos in Lebanon and the bloodshed in Iraq. On this very front, the legislature will deal with a rising number of Iraqi refugees who the government said are straining the resources of the country. Official numbers, depending on the results of a six-month long survey by the Oslo-based Norwegian Research Institute (FAFO), put the number of Iraqi refugees in the kingdom at 500,000.

If the predictions come true, the upcoming parliament will only deepen the general public's apathy towards democratisation in a country that suffers internal economic woes and severe external political pressures.