

Jordan's elections: a good first step on the road to democracy

"Only one third of the electorate voted - nobody thought the elections would be free but they were. It's part of the international wave of democracy - part of the attempt to solve problems through dialogue."

This statement, from a Palestinian socialist who spent nearly three years in prison for his political views, is a compliment to King Hussain of Jordan who can proudly claim the recent election was one of the freest in the Arab world.

Jordanians went to the polls on November 8 for the first time since democracy was suspended following Jordan's defeat in the 1967 Middle East War and Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

Political parties have been outlawed since a coup attempt 32 years ago. Despite this, politicians are more active today than at any time since the 1967 war and around 600 candidates fought for the 80 seats in the new parliament.

The election campaign reawakened an interest in politics that had been suppressed for a long time: no one under the age of 42 had voted before and most of the 850,000 registered voters were voting for the first time.

The main themes were economic reform, political liberalisation, an end to martial law and the legalising of political parties.

The election was not quite what King Hussein had counted on. When Jordanians went to the polls for the first time in 22 years a substantial number registered what can only be described as a protest vote in favour of the Muslim 'fundamentalists'. Their success in winning almost a third of the seats in parliament was unquestionably a rebuff to the King, and together with the election of a group of nationalists and left-wingers, has slimmed down the conservative majority who could be counted on to keep the new parliament habitually docile.

Instead of just giving lip service to their support for the Palestinian cause the Muslim Brothers showed they were prepared to put their money where their mouths were: the 22 brotherhood deputies informed the Lower House Speaker of their wish to donate one month's salary (JD 500 each) to "support the intifada in the Israeli-occupied territories." The option open to the speaker is to decide whether the money will be taken in one lump sum or in monthly instalments.

Officials had wanted the elections to bring people's real feelings into the open. However, the election results do not truly represent public opinion in Jordan: first the turnout was only 61 per cent and second registration of voters was limited.

Palestinians, who make up 60 per cent of Jordan's 3.6m inhabitants, feared their participation would help fix them in a permanent diaspora, in which they would forfeit the right to a homeland and to self-determination.

These concerns provide part of the explanation for

the low voter registration of 40 per cent in predominantly Palestinian areas.

Another factor discouraging Palestinian participation has been a feeling of alienation and uncertainty due to the anti-Palestinian sentiment which emanated from the authorities at the time of the break with the West Bank.

The PLO's Ambassador in Jordan Abu Shamekh insisted that his organisation officially declared it would not interfere in the local elections.

"We have a Palestinian parliament - the PNC. It is the representative of the Palestinian people - not any other parliament. We do not want to help Sharon in his point of view that Jordan is the native country of the Palestinians. Our official position is that what happened in the elections in Jordan is Jordan's internal affair."

But Abu Shamkeh did not hesitate to add that the elections were a very good democratic experience.

While the PLO was not in favour of Palestinians contesting the elections as Palestinians rather than Jordanians, Taher Masri one of the successful Palestinian candidates insists there is no reason why he can't be a good Jordanian working for Jordanian and at the same time have genuine feelings for his homeland. He is also quick to point out that the stability of Jordan is in the interests of the Palestinian cause.

Masri, an independent MP who did not run on any ticket, is concerned about liberties: freedom of speech, freedom of gathering, freedom to form political parties, the abolition of martial law and the combating of unemployment.

He also promises to start raising hell over the head of the government about the security services.

When the speaker of the House of Representatives Suleiman Arar was asked whether the Jordanian people, who have not participated in democratic processes for such a long time, were sufficiently prepared for participation he replied "certainly".

"Some people have suggested that Jordanians are not politically mature enough to deal with democracy. This is an argument that only colonialists or like-minded people could possibly forward. Jordan has four universities, a high standard of elementary and secondary education and about 20,000 university students studying abroad. Now if that promotes ignorance among a people then I don't know what doesn't.

"In Jordan everyone is someone, each person is a sheikh in his own right, even if he only has bread to eat and tea to drink, he will not allow anyone to fool him or to misrepresent him, especially in Parliament, so we the parliamentarians will be looking out for the public's interest - that's for sure."

Protest vote or no protest vote no one can argue that the Jordanian elections are anything but a good first step on the way to democracy.