

Jordan's Elections

An Experience in Limited Democracy

Sixty thousand banners decorated the Jordanian capital, Amman, on October 14th, marking the beginning of the first parliament elections in 22 years. This was called following the popular revolt in April, that was touched off by the mounting economic crisis. The King of Jordan was forced to announce the resumption of parliamentary life. He could not but see that this protest was a clear sign of rapidly growing disenchantment with the regime's policies of suppressing democratic freedoms and obstructing all change conducive to social justice.

Aiming to relieve the mounting political and social tension that had culminated in the April revolt, the regime allowed the elections, having in mind a superficial exercise in democracy. Yet, the very holding of the election campaign served to revive political life in the country. This shows the masses' need for real change on all levels, and their hopes of regaining the democratic freedoms that have been suppressed for decades.

The Parliament's Status

The parliament, being in principle the most powerful institution in the country, has the right to rule on all laws and budgets. By a two-thirds majority, it can override a royal decision. While the King appoints the cabinet and prime minister, the parliament can throw them out - a right it has exercised in the past, such as in 1951, and in 1962 when the parliament withdrew confidence from the government. (In 1951, the parliament was suspended when it objected to the government's program. In 1956, it was suspended after it withdrew confidence from Samir Rifai's government in opposition to its policies. Note: Samir was the father of Zaid Rifai whose

government was forced to resign by the April revolt this year.)

On the other hand, the King has the right to suspend the parliament and rule by emergency powers, as he did for ten years, from 1974 to 1984. The King also has the power to postpone elections - due to be held every three years - for two years. he can thus avoid



having elections when he feels they would pose a threat, as happened in 1986. In 1986, the King extended the parliament for two years, until 1988, whereupon he suspended it just before his decision to sever ties with the Israeli-occupied West Bank. All in all, the legislative body in Jordan has been ineffective for fifteen years. As of July last year, it lost half its members

(Palestinians supposedly representing the West Bank).

Preemptive Measures

In itself, the holding of the elections was a democratic experience for the Jordanian people. The regime, however, diligently worked to keep them from being fully democratic, by taking some preemptive measures.

The decision to allow parliamentary elections was not coupled with the abolition of the emergency and martial laws in force since 1967. This was carefully designed to enable the regime to devastate the election in case the results weren't to its interest, or in case of future differences between the parliament and the cabinet, since the emergency laws give the cabinet the right to suspend the parliament «in times of difficulty.»

With martial law still in effect, political parties remain banned. Thus, candidacy was on an individual basis - in itself a violation of the people's right to organize. Moreover, the law requires anyone who wishes to run for office, to pay 500 Jordanian dinars, non-refundable. It is clear that this measure is directed against the toiling masses: peasants, workers, craftsmen and low-income employees, thus limiting membership in the parliament to bourgeoisie.

In addition, the law prohibits candidates from reaching out to their constituency through public meetings or other means they might choose. The only means are forums organized through government channels. In a couple of instances, even authorized debates between candidates were prohibited. This happened in Al Balqa'a district, when the mayor issued an order on October 12th, forbidding any debates due to the harsh criticism