



**Statement of the Pre-Election Assessment Delegation
of the National Democratic Institute Regarding
Jordan's November 9, 2010 Parliamentary Elections**

September 19, 2010

From September 14-17, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) organized a pre-election assessment mission to observe preparations for the November 9, 2010 parliamentary elections in Jordan. The members of the delegation were Frances Fitzgerald, senator from Ireland; Sam Gejdenson, former U.S. congressman; Francesca Binda, NDI's senior director in Jerusalem and former elections official from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); and Leslie Campbell, NDI's regional director for the Middle East and North Africa. Following meetings with senior government officials, political party representatives, prospective candidates, citizen election monitors, civil society leaders, and media representatives, the delegation issued this statement on September 19, 2010.

On November 9, 2010, Jordanians will go to the polls for the Kingdom's third parliamentary election in seven years. In dissolving the parliament in November 2009, King Abdullah cited public dissatisfaction with the performance of the lower chamber and called for a revised electoral law and elections "that are a model of integrity, impartiality, and transparency."

Subsequent statements by senior government officials reiterated the promise of a fair and open election. Civil society groups saw the official statements as an opportunity to strengthen their role in shaping the electoral process in Jordan and worked to build demand for electoral reform. A coalition of civil society groups formally submitted recommendations to the government that they believed would support healthy competition, produce a more representative and effective legislature, and increase the number of women elected.

Civil society recommendations included: replacing the single, non-transferable vote system (commonly called "one man, one vote") with a mixed electoral system; reconsidering the districting system to ensure greater equality among districts; establishing an independent national commission to supervise elections; increasing the women's quota; ensuring the secrecy of the ballot and making provisions for illiterate voters; lowering the voting age to 18; maintaining the process of counting votes inside polling stations and announcing results immediately; publicizing voters lists; and allowing civil society organizations to observe the electoral process.

In May 2010 the government unveiled a new temporary election law. The law did not address all of civil society's demands, but introduced a number of changes to the electoral system, including:

- The division of electoral zones into non-geographic or “virtual” sub-districts equal to the number of seats per zone.
- The broadening of election administration beyond the Ministry of Interior, adding an independent judge as the deputy of the Higher Election Committee and a representative from the Ministry of Political Development.
- The addition of ten new seats to the parliament, including four seats for urban, primarily Palestinian, areas and six seats for women candidates.
- The invocation of tougher penalties on electoral crimes, including vote-buying.
- The introduction of a special registration system for illiterate voters.
- The enfranchisement of civilians working for military and security agencies.
- The lowering of the voting age to 18.

Many of the Jordanians that the NDI delegation spoke with expressed cautious optimism about the prospects for a better election process, noting that voters lists have been produced electronically and publicized, preparations are being made to protect the secrecy of the ballot that include new private voting booths and enhanced security for ballot boxes, and arrangements are being made to accommodate disabled voters.

The government has authorized domestic election observation and it appears that as many as 3,500 non-partisan observers will be allowed to witness election procedures—a vast improvement over the 150 who were accredited only 48 hours ahead of the 2007 election.

Political parties and candidates told the NDI delegation that they welcomed the government’s commitment to make the candidate registration process more transparent and there was praise for election officials for actively consulting with political parties.

While there have been improvements, many Jordanian political activists and analysts emphasized that the most significant recommended electoral changes—redistricting and the possible revision of the voting system—have been postponed. Jordan has allowed electoral districts to become grossly disproportionate—there is a rural electoral district, for example, that has fewer than 7,000 voters while one district in Amman has in excess of 200,000. This underrepresentation of urban, largely Palestinian-origin voters has long been an issue of political contention.

The government responded to the districting question by adding four new urban seats, but it also created new “virtual” sub-districts—a source of great confusion for parties and potential candidates. The sub-districts do not correspond to a particular geographical area within the main district, but voters will be free to cast a vote for any one candidate in any one sub-district. At the time of writing, procedures for managing the sub-district process were unclear and it remains to be seen what electoral effect this unique and untested system will have. A great deal of transparency on the part of election officials will be required to ensure that candidates and voters gain faith in the new system.

Jordan’s voting system, which allows only one vote to be cast for one candidate in districts with multiple seats (corresponding to the virtual sub-districts), is seen to favor tribal- and clan-backed independent candidates, as voters are under family pressure to

vote for local notables and candidates with strong tribal affiliations, rather than political party-backed contestants or newer entrants to the political scene. Many Jordanians have advocated for a form of proportional representation to enhance political party development and encourage renewal of the political class.

In addition to examining the technical aspects of election preparation, the NDI delegation also discussed with Jordanians the atmosphere surrounding the election and observed concern over potential voter apathy and the impact of an election boycott advocated by the Kingdom's largest organized political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) and a number of allied opposition parties.

Not unlike many countries in the world, Jordanian citizens are experiencing economic hardship and are increasingly skeptical of the ability of elected representatives to have a positive impact on living conditions. Combined with the perception of a flawed election in 2007 and disenchantment with the resulting parliament, there is a distinct lack of enthusiasm for another political exercise that may have little meaning.

If a threatened boycott materializes, IAF supporters, who make up a significant percentage of Jordan's population, may be deprived of an electoral choice. Voter cynicism and a boycott could seriously undermine the effectiveness of the parliament resulting from the 2010 election, and therefore should be of concern to Jordan's government.

Prime Minister Samir Rifai has been meeting with IAF representatives to discuss their concerns and the content of such meetings is clearly a political matter to be left to the participants themselves. Many Jordanians, however, expressed to the NDI delegation their trepidation about a boycott and hope that the government encourages the widest range of political options for voters. Averting a boycott would send a powerful, positive signal to voters, and, no matter the outcome of talks, election officials should consider a voter education campaign to encourage participation in the election and to reassure voters that the process will be fair and that their choices will be respected.

There are also widespread concerns about the effect of money in Jordanian political processes. Several potential candidates complained that the cost of running political campaigns kept them out of the race and that unclear political spending limits, weak financial disclosure laws, and opaque enforcement of rules limit public awareness of the role of political contributions.

Questions were also raised about access to public media, with suggestions that all candidates receive equitable access to free or reduced-fee time on television and radio.

The delegation heard some concern about the established practice in Jordan of appealing election results to the parliament. Although the new election law includes provisions for complaints and appeals processes for voter registration and candidate registration, it is silent on the issue of appealing election results.

Finally, the delegation noted confusion about the meaning and utility of international election observation. For some Jordanians, election “observation”— a term that in practice means “watching and reporting,” not “interfering” or “supervising”— is seen as a potential affront to sovereignty. In fact, international election observation is an accepted practice in most democratic nations and is welcomed around the world, including in the United States and Western European nations. Election observation, a highly cooperative and mutual process in most instances, can improve electoral processes and greatly enhance public confidence in the system. In partnership with citizen observers, international observers can objectively note adherence to procedures while respecting the authority of local officials.

A request by the NDI delegation to meet with the officials charged with the operational election preparations at the Ministry of Interior was declined. The delegation did meet with members of the Higher Committee for Elections and other senior government officials. NDI hopes to arrange discussions with operational elections officials at a later date.

In conclusion, NDI’s pre-election delegation to Jordan would like to emphasize the many steps already taken to enhance the 2010 parliamentary election, including the expanded role of domestic election monitors, the publication of voters’ lists, the enhanced role of judges in election committees, the increased women’s quota, special provisions to accommodate disabled voters, and the professional quality of election administration.

The delegation would respectfully suggest that there are further improvements and guarantees that could be put in place before election day to promote greater voter confidence in the process. These include:

- The publication of candidate lists by sub-district during the registration period as well as the publication of the final candidate lists by sub-district.
- Confirmation that election results at all levels of the counting and aggregation process will be made public immediately after the counting and that counting of the votes will happen at the polling station where the voting has taken place before the ballot boxes are transported and/or moved in any way.
- Good faith attempts to maximize the choices available to voters by encouraging the broadest possible participation.
- Introduction of regulations to allow for the appeal of election results by candidates in a systematic, neutral, and timely manner.
- A concerted media campaign to discourage vote buying and financial violations and to encourage voter participation. A voter education campaign should also include information about the sub-districts to help ameliorate confusion.
- Implementation of appropriate measures to ensure against multiple voting, as voters can vote in any polling station.
- An initiative to provide equitable air time at no or reduced cost to all registered candidates.

Background on International Observation and NDI

NDI welcomes the public statements made by senior Jordanian government officials that international groups are welcome to witness the electoral process. These statements reflect the growing consensus that international election observation, along with citizen observation and party poll-watching, has become widely accepted by countries around the world and that it plays an important role in informing citizens and the international community about the nature of each country's electoral process.

Pre-election assessment visits are an important component of international election observation methodology. In the weeks leading up to the November polls, NDI will send a team of experienced election experts from Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and the United States to witness electoral preparations throughout the country. NDI will deploy an additional international group of observers for the November 9 elections and the immediate post-election period. This comprehensive approach to assessing the pre-election, election-day, and post-election periods demonstrates the interest of the international community in the development of democratic political processes and ensures that election day is understood in its proper context.

International election observation, when done in accordance with accepted principles for impartial assessments, has the potential to enhance the integrity of election processes by encouraging best electoral practices and deterring misconduct, as well as by identifying problems and irregularities, which can lead to effective redress. It thus contributes to building public confidence in elections and elected parliaments.

International election observers are welcomed by countries in all stages of democratic development. NDI has organized more than 150 delegations to assess pre-election, election-day and post-election processes around the globe and in the Middle East and North Africa region, including in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories, and Yemen. NDI conducts its election observation in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, which is endorsed by 35 intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including the United Nations Secretariat. (http://www.ndi.org/files/1923_declaration_102705_0.pdf)

The pre-election delegation does not seek to interfere in Jordan's election process, nor does it intend to—or could it—render a final assessment of the election process. NDI recognizes that it will be the people of Jordan who will determine the credibility of elections. The delegation offers this pre-election statement in the spirit of supporting and strengthening democratic institutions in Jordan.

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government. NDI has sponsored democratic development programs in Jordan since 1993 and has maintained an office in the country since 2004. NDI's international observation mission in Jordan is funded by a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development. More information is available at www.ndi.org.

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