

Jordanian Civil Society and Election Observation

The government resistance to allow civil society organizations play a role in independent local observation of the elections has triggered deep frustration and resentment among Jordanian society. Many CSOs opted to withdraw from the whole observation process, in response to the increasing restrictions set by the Ministry of Interior, which confined the number of observers to 150 persons only. These 150 observers would hold special permits to enter the polling centers, with the whole process performed under the umbrella of the National Center for Human Rights.

On the other hand, several CSOs believe that the government should not impose a plan on civil society regarding its role in elections, nor impose the National Center for Human Rights as the sole implementer of this mission. Civil society is indeed able alone to identify its umbrella, if perceived necessary.

Observers believe that the group of CSOs that accepted the government's conditions on election observation should abstain from participating and should officially announce their anti—governmental stance. This would put the government in a difficult position, and eventually, it will have to back-off its conditions and grant more freedom to civil local observation.

Despite restrictions imposed by the government, the group of CSOs will observe the election believe they have managed to achieve undeniable gains at this stage. They have insisted that CSOs' representatives enter the polling centers and watch the voting process, which is considered an unprecedented achievement and a step forward that will be built upon in the election process in the future.

This is considered the first time that civil society takes role in election observation, which used to be a mission restricted to candidates' representatives, political parties, and media. Electoral observation was never carried out by human rights organizations or any societal group in Jordan.

When compared to other Arab countries, Jordan is considered late in taking this initiative only in 2007. Civil society has already observed the elections in Morocco, Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt.

As is well known, the concerned authorities in Arab governments did not spontaneously decide to grant civil society the right to observe the elections. Talking from an election expert point of view, we would have wished that the government approval was a complete one with no restrictions or limitations on the number of observers and the method of observation. Nevertheless, this only a first step towards accepting full local and international election monitoring, and will definitely be built upon in the future.

The process we are approaching will empower hundreds and thousands of citizens, most of whom are young people, to acquire training on international standards on free and fair elections, in addition to enlightening them on the Jordanian Electoral System. As we are noticing, these observers are very enthusiastic about the training, since it emphasizes their role in evaluating the integrity and transparency of elections. Indeed, this training on election observation for NGOs' activists has proven that civil society could be effective partner to the government in the political and electoral process.

We believe that asserting the role of civil society in election monitoring is an issue that could not be achieved by vigorous confrontation, especially within the existing legal and political framework of elections. It could only be achieved by opening channels of dialogue, conducting advocacy campaigns, and building trust. It could only be maintained by a systematic process of follow-up after the elections.

Unfortunately, critiques have questioned the capacity of civil society to observe the elections, claiming that it is not yet qualified to uphold such a role. This has indeed affected the image of civil society, and damaged its reputation with the government, which took an opposing stance towards civil society. Taking a defensive track, some civil society leaders were put off, and were forced to cede away.

Such negative reactions from the government's side were not welcomed, and in fact, they distorted the image of the government, which had officially committed itself to collaborating with civil society, and insisted on activating the role of civil society in political development.