



University Student Council Elections Crisis: The Case of a Jordanian University

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Introduction

Student council elections are the adopted mechanism to enact students' representation within Jordanian universities. The elections mechanism aligns with the Royal Vision directives on removing barriers to youth's representation, and creating safe spaces for youth's organized and positive participation.

Indeed, student council elections complement the national efforts in the process of transitioning into an inclusive democracy, which pushes towards enhancing the political participation of youth and highlighting their role in decision-making.

However, the commitment of Jordanian universities to hold the student council elections in line with national vision requires scrutiny. This paper discusses the case of a university that witnessed the suspension of student council elections in 2013, which have had for a consequence further isolation of students, keep them from political and social openness, and disrupts the development of their capabilities, creativity, and innovation.

According to the 2019/2020 annual report of Al al-Bayt University,¹ the university has had more than 20,000 female and male students attending the various faculties and centers within its campus. Considering the continued absence of democratic practice in the university and actual student representation stretching over nine consecutive years, most of the university's students live in a state of political alienation that forces them to refrain from participating in public life, which is reflected in the low voter turnout in legislative elections among youth. This is a natural result of the lack of experience and electoral practice and any form of representation in their university years, which extends from four to five years. There is no one to stand for their various demands, whether they are related to service or academic aspects. Students' conscious enthusiasm for fair and peaceful claims as well as any attempt for individual or collective initiatives clashes with the disciplinary systems in place. These systems that restrict student activism are detached from reality and the growing technological development and contradict the directions of the government and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research². The latter have not been enhanced or amended for more than 10 years. To illustrate, clubs and events sponsored by the university concerned with youth participation in public life and political empowerment do not understand the historical context of student activism, nor do they rise to students' concerns and issues. It is unsurprising that students' sense of belonging to the university thereby dissipates. In violation of the constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the university administration thus

¹Al al-Bayt University, "Al al-Bayt University annual report for the academic year .2019/2020 https://www.aabu.edu.jo/AR/Centers/QADC/Departments/SAP/Documents/annual_report2019-2020.pdf

² Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, "The Cabinet of Jordan approves a system regulating the practice of student partisan activities in higher education institutions for the year 2022, 2022 . <https://bit.ly/3GnvKKV>

deprives students of many fundamental rights, such as the right to express opinions, and the right to elections and democratic representation.

Despite the national desire to integrate youth being demonstrated in the form of legislations of a political nature, foremost of which is the Election Law³ and the Political Parties Law of 2022,⁴ Al al-Bayt University did not advocate the national efforts created by civil society organizations in programs taking the shape of initiatives dedicated to boosting youth participation in public life and preparing them for political life. Moreover, the university did not rescind the decision to suspend the student council elections as of the paper's writing date. This paper attempts to identify the dimensions of the current situation and its contradiction with Jordanian laws and the recommendations of the Royal Commission. The paper directs its recommendations to the Ministry of Higher Education, the Presidency of Al al-Bayt University, civil society, and the Jordanian government.

The roots of the issue

In an attempt to return to the root causes behind the suspension of the student council elections, we should go back to year 2013 in particular, during which two separate incidents, one of a violent dispute and the other involving a stabbing of a student inside the university campus, quickly turned into tribal disputes further spiralling into unjustified violence. This incident had occurred one month before the student council elections and led to a wide administrative crisis and the suspension of classes, followed by an announcement from the university administration declaring the postponement of the elections for only two months. After the two months had elapsed, the university administration simply issued brief statements indicating that "the current conditions in the university do not allow [the elections] to be held." Five years later, in an on-air interview with Al-Mamlaka TV in 2018, Dr. Omar Al Ateen, who then served as Dean of Student Affairs, stated, "The student council elections are one of the causes of violence, provoking strife and quarrels among students, and the university does adopt student clubs as an alternative".⁵

Since then, the statements issued by the university administration have been limited to announcing the containment of student disputes that go beyond the university and into societal quarrels, controlling them by waiving penalties against the students who cause these conflicts. The university pledged several times to resume elections after one semester under new laws and regulatory guidelines. However, it has yet to fulfill these promises, which reflects its unwillingness to analyze the causes of the crisis and how to address it.

³ Prime Ministry, "Law No. (4) of 2022 Elections Law for the Lower House: The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Official Gazette, Issue 2865), 2022. <https://bit.ly/3WOL5tu>

⁴ Prime Ministry, "Law No. (7) of 2022, Political Parties Law (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan), Official Gazette, Issue (2930), 2022 .<https://bit.ly/3C1hepF>

⁵Al Mamlaka TV channel, "The absence of student council elections from Al al-Bayt University since 2013", 2018. Video report <https://bit.ly/3lbDLed>

It must be noted here that the solution to this dilemma and others was demonstrated in the necessity to cancel the "one-vote system" that the popular forces reject, and on which the student council elections were based, and was adopted by the Deanship of Student Affairs in each electoral cycle. The popular forces and students rejected the voting system for two reasons, the first being its impact on the embodiment of tribal, regional, and sub-national affiliations that lead to strife and increase violence, which counters the main objective of the elections that is to promote democratic awareness among students. The second reason is that the outputs of the one-vote system do not reflect the students' orientations. Added to this is considering distributing election flyers and statements as a disciplinary violation and placing a condition stipulating that student activists who have received a penalty according to the disciplinary regulations are not allowed to run for elections. This system gives the student the right to elect one candidate in the faculty or department whose seats sometimes reach five on a feeble basis. Therefore, it was necessary to work gradually on enforcing the proportional representation system in student council elections.

The growing gap between students and the university administration

The gap between the administration of Al al-Bayt University and the students widens in the absence of student representation, with all attempts to protest against the continuation of the university's seemingly unfair policies being subject to restriction. These policies include those requiring advance payment before registration or imposing meal prices that do not consider the discrepancies in students' financial situation. Additionally, students are immediately summoned when they attempt to express their affiliation or declare anything about a national or Arab cause. Even though the 2007 Political Parties Law does not prohibit political action within universities⁶, it contradicts with reality and fails to change or amend Article 5 of the instructions of student clubs, which prohibits engaging in political matters and places them in the same position as sectarian and regionalist matters.⁷ This gap extends beyond representation and political activism. It affects also students ability to voice up the problems they face at the university, which are also oppressed. After a video⁸ was posted on Facebook documenting bus drivers' violation of law by overloading passengers and demonstrating misconduct, and showed the poor management of the university transport system, the paper's author, who was the one posting the aforementioned video, says: "We were beaten and insulted by the bus drivers in the presence of the university security officer, who did not intervene. What prevented me from filing a complaint at the time was the panic spreading among my fellow students due to the university's mobilization against the student campaign, a campaign that simply called for correcting the situation of transportation and transport buses using the hashtag #My Story_With_Transportation_At_Al_al-Bayt."

Inconsistencies in the enforced laws

⁶Attorney Jamal Al-Khatahtbeh, "Jordanian Laws," Political Parties Law Code, 2007.

<https://jamallawfirm.wordpress.com>

⁷Al al-Bayt University, Instructions for Student Clubs at Al al-Bayt University issued by the University Council, 2022. <https://aabu.edu.jo/AR/Departments/legalaffairs/Pages/Instructions.aspx>

⁸Ahmed Helmy Al-Ably, The Best Day in My University, a post published on social media, 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/Ahmad.7ilme/videos/10206210738048184/?idorvanity=191374714565402>

The application of the new laws and regulations still faces many challenges. For example, the System of Scholarships in Jordanian Universities and Colleges of Society for the Children of Officers and Members of the Jordanian Armed Forces No. 80 of 1980, known as the Royal Benefaction (Makruma), requires students who benefit from the Makruma not to be a member of any political party. This is stipulated in the form for students on scholarships to study at the university, which the student signs with the General Command of the Jordan Armed Forces.⁹

Article (18) of the scholarship system details specific cases for the termination of a Makruma student, the most important of which is "if they belong to any party or undertake any political activity that is not consistent with the interest of the Kingdom and its supreme policy, and is proven by a report from the security authorities or the university or college to which they attend". This also constitutes a clear and explicit contradiction with the noble Royal Vision of inviting young people to engage in partisan work and encouraging them to contribute to the process of change and modernization, being the largest segment of society.

Al al-Bayt University allocates 20% of the academic seats each year to Makruma students. This means that the university and the Makruma system deprive one-fifth of university students of political participation and their representation through elected members, whether inside the university through the Student Council or outside it through political parties. This requires effective coordination efforts between state institutions and intensive discussions at the legislative level regarding this clear inconsistency.

Article (4) of the Political Parties Law of 2022 dispels students' concerns and fears about partisan work. Article (20) of the Political Parties Law also enshrines the right for students of higher education institutions that are members of the political party to practice partisan activities within the campuses of those institutions without any restrictions or prejudice to their rights. The efforts of the government, community institutions, and popular forces in this regard are consistent with the outputs of the Royal Commission to modernize the political system focused on empowering youth to participate politically in what it calls the stage of youth empowerment at the age of 19-22,¹⁰ which promotes the values of active and positive citizenship, the rule of law, and equal opportunities.

For instance, the recommendations of the Royal Commission for this stage stipulate that "public and private universities establish elected unions or student councils, and work to activate the idle councils in a way that responds to the Royal Vision by promoting active participation in public life." It also details the need to create a budget for student unions and councils from that specified for each university and calls for restructuring and activating the role of student clubs and the Deanship of Student Affairs in a way that

⁹ Laith Kamal Nasraween, Makruma students and non-affiliation with parties, Al-Rai website, 2022. <https://alrai.com/article/10754093> [كتاب/طلاب-المكرماتوعدم-الانتماء-للأحزاب](#)

¹⁰ The Royal Commission for the Modernization of the Political System, Proposed Recommendations for Youth Empowerment, 2021. <https://tahdeeth.jo/>

invests youth energies, in addition to the creation of student clubs concerned with political empowerment and participation in public life. Thus, the recommendations of the Royal Commission have opened the door to enhance the political participation of youth, starting from within the university campus outwards. The problem today remains in transforming these recommendations into a reality that students in all universities can see.

Recommendations

The paper presents its recommendations on three levels, according to the concerned party:

At the legal and legislative level, it is necessary to propose a draft law for a general student union that would act as an umbrella protecting the right granted to students by the new political parties' law. This is because the purpose of organizing partisan activities is to give students the legitimacy and the right to exercise control over the university and its activities that often do not live up to their concerns and issues, unlike Article 4 of the Parties Law of 2022, which regulates students' partisan activities in a way that encourages participation in public work and elections organized by the higher education institution for student councils, unions, societies or student clubs. It is possible to propose the draft law in the short and medium term before the end of the legislative session in order for it to be implemented at the beginning of the next academic year.

At the level of Al al-Bayt University, it is recommended that the university announces the opening of candidacy for student council elections, sets a date for its resumption, provides guarantees that it will not be dissolved without reason, works on hearing students' proposals on election mechanisms, and develops effective communication channels that meet the aspirations and hopes of students and adopt their claims. Although this is a continuous and long-term process, it can begin with small steps that transform the university into a microcosm of political life. Also, at the university level, the disciplinary systems in force must be reviewed to give a real space for student work, such as distributing electoral statements and leaflets, collecting signatures, and abolishing the one-vote system to reduce the phenomenon of university violence within its walls. This can be done in phases in the short term.

At the national grassroots level, community institutions and student forces must aim to create pressure on Jordanian public opinion to give students their rights based on the provision of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights sanctioned by the Jordanian government, which explicitly stipulates equal access to higher education depending on the competency, and the gradual introduction of free higher education.¹¹ These forces can push for holding a national conference to discuss higher education issues in which all official and parliamentary forces and events participate to advance our universities, whose reputation and prestige have become at stake in light of the spread of the phenomenon of university violence and the absence of government

¹¹United Nations Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic and Social Rights Twenty-First Session, November-3 December 1999 Right to Education (Article 13) <https://bit.ly/3G02k3X>

support. This is alongside the intent to formulate a proposal for a law to establish a general union for Jordanian students that mandates the unity of students and strengthens the bonds of nationalism through a series of activities and events at the Kingdom level.

At the governmental level, the development plans drawn up by successive governments in the short, medium, and long term should cover supporting and advancing Al al-Bayt University while giving importance to the enhancement of the university's location adjacent to poor communities in Mafraq and the northeastern Badia, which hosts the largest concentration of Syrian refugees, being such a strategic location. In addition to the challenges occurring due to the highest and most widespread poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment rates in this area, the university faces the challenges of the growing need for education and services.

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