



Partisan Activity in Jordanian Universities: Guarantees and Mechanisms for the Implementation of the 2022 Political Parties Law

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Introduction

The Political Parties Law was published in the Official Journal on April 14, 2022. For the first time, this law allowed students to engage in partisan activity inside universities, as Article (20) Paragraph (a) stipulates: "Students of higher education institutions that are members of the party have the right to engage in partisan activities within the campuses of those institutions, without any restriction or prejudice to their rights, provided that a special system is placed to regulate these activities."¹ Before its adoption as a law, many discussion and exploration activities dealt with the draft upon which the law emerged: "Bylaw for Regulating the Practice of Student Political Party Affiliation at Higher Education Institutions". And, between rejection and apprehension, the question remains whether there are guarantees for implementing the provisions of this law, especially since the task of organizing partisan student work has been entrusted to the Deanships of Student Affairs, which, according to students' opinions, impede student work.

This paper focuses on the guarantees and mechanisms for enacting the Political Parties Law concerning political activity and partisan work on university campuses. It also addresses questions about whether this law will make a difference in student life and the process of political modernization as a whole. It also attempts to answer students' queries about what is expected from the approval of this law, their fears, and the guarantees they seek, especially in the absence of such an experience as previously it was prohibited and totally foreign to the student community.

Among the most pressing challenges in this area directed to decision makers are those that the Council of Higher Education will face while devising a consensual system for practicing partisan activities in universities after the draft system was subjected to many objections by

¹ Prime Ministry, "Law No. (7) of 2022, The Political Parties Law (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan), Official Gazette, Issue (2930), 2022. <https://bit.ly/3C1hepF>

students and partisans alike, including members of the Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System which proposed the Political Parties Law of 2022. As for the chief challenge, it is for this law not to fall into the shortcomings of previous legislations, such as the gap between legislation and implementation or the conflict between the contents of the systems that will enforce this law and the contents of the law itself; otherwise, it will be "mere ink on paper" as described by one of the students.²

The significance of involving university youth in political life comes from a belief that it is the most effective and organized means for political action. Additionally, any social, political, or economic movement that leads to change can only occur through the integration of youth, the largest group in Jordanian society, as the percentage of those between the ages of 12-30 constitutes 35.78% of the population.³

Democratic practices within educational institutions are essential for all those interested in reinforcing democracy in Jordan because of their role in preparing citizens who understand its meaning, understand its principles, and adhere to its ethics and practices.⁴ The successful management of political work in higher education institutions will also have a ripple effect in increasing the level of trust in government entities, as according to the Arab Barometer data for the year (2018-2019). It is worth noting that the percentage of Jordanians' trust in government institutions does not exceed 38%.⁵ The Secretary-General of the Justice and Reform Party believes it will contribute to expanding the scope of work "and enable young people to participate prominently in the partisan process through educational bodies as an institutional activity that extends over time and is not an individual effort or an independent society in itself. Additionally, the student partisan activity feeds on society's embrace, thanks to its system and values that establish an institutional democracy".⁶

Scope and challenges of the problem

Since the publication of proposal by the Royal Commission for the Modernization of the Political System in 2021 and allowing students of higher education institutions to do partisan work, public debates have focused on activating the role of universities in developing political awareness among students. In a study published on the part of Jordanian universities in developing political understanding, 90% of students gave priority to "reconsidering the existing educational policies in terms of granting students the freedom of association with parties, respecting academic liberties, and planning to accredit programs for developing political awareness,"⁷ through permitting partisan education and political debates, and not restricting students belonging to political parties.

² Phone interview with a student belonging to the Ahl al-Hemmeh bloc on 11/1/2022

³ Ministry of Youth, National Youth Strategy 2019-2025, n.d.

https://moy.gov.jo/sites/default/files/jordan_national_youth_strategy_2019-2025_english_compressed_1.pdf

⁴ Al-Sulaim Bashar, "The Level of Democratic Practices and Attitudes towards Political Participation among Student Councils in Jordanian Universities." Educational Sciences, Volume 43, Appendix 4, 2016, 1503.

⁵ Kayyali Abdel-Wahhab, "The Arab World's Trust in Government and the Perils of Generalization," The Arab Barometer, 2020. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/06/the-arab-worlds-trust-in-government-and-the-perils-of-generalization/>

⁶ Haneen Al-Jaafari, Party Work in Universities: Freedom or Restriction for Youth? Al Rai Newspaper, 2022. <https://alrai.com/article/10743140>

⁷ Safa Al-Shweihat, The role of Jordanian universities in enhancing and developing political awareness of students, 2020.

Public deliberations focused on the parties' role by offering compelling programs to young people, opening communication channels, and establishing partnerships between universities and political parties to encourage young people to join them. This requires the parties to present actual and realistic programs that persuade the youth on reformation and working for the collective interest, in addition to involving this active group in the decision-making process and assuming leadership positions in the parties.⁸ However, the leaders' perspective toward youth and their abilities to take leadership positions may stand in the way of achieving this. One of the leaders of the Al-Resala Party stated: "Young people cannot assume leadership positions, as it is a responsibility that requires extensive experience, but we encourage and support them in municipal elections, and others,"⁹ and this is the reason for the low percentage of young people in these positions. The percentage of young people in the general assembly of the Al-Resala Party is 35%, while the Justice and Reform Party has a youth percentage of 25% in its general assembly. On the other hand, some parties do not have statistics on the percentage of young people, and others have not declared them.¹⁰ Therefore, although a large part of the law's success relies on higher education institutions, this success is not complete without the efforts of the parties and their ability to entice young people.

With the adoption of the law, many issues were raised about the mechanism of its implementation and how the system for practicing partisan activities will be. Will universities witness a genuine openness to political life? Especially since student work faced great difficulties before partisan work was allowed, as many students received disciplinary penalties, sometimes reaching expulsion from the university because of organizing or participating in student protests calling for lowering fees, systemizing transportation, or holding other activities and events that the university deems as a violation of its regulations.¹¹

A study on "Obstacles to Al-Balqa Applied University Students Joining Political Parties" divided these obstacles into three: political, legislative, and social. The study showed that the legislative obstacle is the first, and "the absence of legislation to protect party members from all forms of official and security interference"¹² is the most important. This shows the pressure exerted on partisan students in universities. Although the law came to fill the legislative gap, providing guarantees to protect partisan students now appears essential to activate the law.

To overcome the disciplinary acts taken against them, students turn to either social networking sites or tribes, as social networking sites increase their role while reducing, but not eliminating, the pressure of the deanships. A university student adhering to one of the student blocs mentioned the pressures exerted against partisan students to withdraw in the event of running for the councils of student unions. He believes that the Deanships of Student Affairs were an obstacle to student work, and they exercised the role of guardian over them and obtained approval for activities from the security authorities.¹³

⁸ Haneen al-Jaafari, Student partisan activities...a step towards reform/<https://alrai.com/article/10755326> 2022

⁹ On the Cusp of Transformation, by Muhammad Abu Rumman, Abdullah Al-Jabour, and Wael Al-Khatib, (Amman: Politics and Society Institute (PSI), 2022) p.109.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A protest by students at the University of Jordan as a result of the dismissal of members of the Student Union from the university for their participation in a protest, Roya News, 2022 <https://royanews.tv/news/61265> .

¹² Najadat, Abdul Salam (2015). Obstacles to joining Al-Balqa Applied University students to political parties, "A field study on students at the Northern Colleges", Journal of the College of Education, Al-Azhar University, No. (162), Part Three, pp. 362

¹³ Phone interview with a student belonging to the Islamic bloc (Ahl al-Hemmeh) on 01/11/2022

Considering the parties' inability to defend their members in the event of any clash or security pressures, the students turn to the clans that can still stand up to the authorities. For example, a student was expelled from the university because he organized a partisan protest inside the campus. He stated, "as soon as the decision to dismiss me was made, I contacted the party of which I am a member, and its administration and all its attempts to bring me back to school failed, which forced me to resort to notable people in my clan, who managed to help me continue with my education."¹⁴ Accordingly, the parties seem incapable of imposing themselves as political actors capable of protecting and representing their student members. This issue relates not only to parties but also to the general environment that regulates political and partisan work inside and outside universities, as the authorities are still the most robust entity when it comes to controlling youth and partisan work.

Here, the importance of the Deanships of Student Affairs' role emerges, as students believe that students' activism surpasses laws and regulations, and that the legislator must keep pace with this historic experience. What is mostly needed is a real will for change that begins with amending student disciplining procedures in universities and putting an end to security interference and pestering.¹⁵

According to a dean of student affairs at a public university who requested to remain anonymous, believes that the vision is still unclear for the implementation of the Parties Law, and considers that the new law not only requires the organization of partisan work, but also requires new mechanisms and strategies. This is although he personally opposes allowing partisan work because it will further push partisanship within the university, turning it into a field of skirmishes.¹⁶ This opinion is not unpopular amongst the deans of public universities, who expressed frequently their opposition to student partisan activity in informal meetings with faculty members for the same reasons.

This raises questions about the eligibility of the deans of student affairs to implement the provisions of the law and reflects the reality of the students' fears about enforcing the law and their demands.

Proposed mechanisms to implement the law

According to Article 3, Paragraph (a) of the law approved by the Cabinet of Jordan on November 20, 2022: "Students have the right to engage in the following partisan activities on campus: awareness and partisan education, introducing the electoral process, encouraging student participation in public work and in the elections organized by the Higher Education Institution for student councils, unions, associations, or student clubs in it, and holding seminars and political debates and participating in them."

Opening the way for universities according to the law will mainly contribute to raising students' political awareness, revolutionizing society's culture and increasing the efficiency of the educational process carried out by universities as key players in political upbringing. The law also prohibits educational institutions from putting pressures on students because of their partisan affiliations or attempting to influence them. However, these provisions require new

¹⁴ Ghada Al-Sheikh. Why do Jordanians trust the clan more than partisanship? Daraj 06/01/2023
[/https://daraj.media/102852](https://daraj.media/102852)

¹⁵ Phone interview with a student belonging to the left-wing (Al-Tajdid) bloc, on 11/01/2023.

¹⁶ A telephone interview with one of the deans of student affairs at Jordanian universities on 07/11/2022

student work systems within universities and preparing and training university cadres to deal with this new phase. Therefore, there is an urgent need to adopt alternative mechanisms to ensure that students enforce the law and that change is not limited to legislation but includes mechanisms for its implementation. The paper proposes the following mechanisms:

1. Providing legal immunities for partisan students inside universities to protect their rights. This immunity does not exempt students from criminal prosecution for offenses outside partisan political work. These immunities can be formulated through a committee consisting of representatives from the Ministries of Justice and Higher Education, parties, authorities, and representatives of students to agree on the mechanism and to guarantee that these immunities ensure that students are not strained to achieve the basic assurances for students by ending security interventions, taking into account that keeping students without exemptions will not bridge the crisis of trust in institutions, and it will even pose a threat to the principle of the rule of law.
2. Creating an independent entity in the university whose mission is to manage student partisan work. This would enable the university to provide better work for students. This entity is to be established by the Council of Higher Education to function within the steps before enforcing the system that regulates student partisan activities and include university cadres qualified to manage political work.
This step's importance comes from the crisis of trust between students and the Deanships of Student Affairs, as students consider it a façade of the security authorities. When the students talked about their experiences, they indicated that: "The Deanship of Student Affairs refers students to investigation committees, and punishes them for expressing their opinions and criticizing the university's decisions, and that the Dean of Student Affairs has changed and the investigation committees were abolished, but this confirms to us that the issue is still linked to people, not to a system, which I believe does not provide a suitable environment and conditions for political action." Students and activists have expressed their fears about assigning deanships the task of managing student partisan work, as they faced many difficulties through student work, indicating their skepticism about the level of change that will occur in "student political work" because of the deanships' interventionism in student affairs and activities, and "baring them of their content with amendments and limitations put by these very deanships".¹⁷
3. Organizing joint work between the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research targeting the presidents of Jordanian universities and the deans of student affairs to spread awareness of the need to foster the culture of partisanship and political participation so that they realize the importance of partisan activity in universities, as a large part of the success of this experiment depends significantly on them. This is alongside amending student work practices and disciplinary systems in line with the political parties law, as disciplinary systems penalize the practice of political work in universities, in addition to adjusting student union election systems and giving powers to these unions to achieve students' aspirations and raise the level of participation in student elections, as this phase needs

¹⁷ Tayseer Al-Naimat, "Universities and Politics: A Controversy Over the Importance of Changing the Perspective on Student Work," Al-Ghad Newspaper, 2022. <http://bit.ly/3XbEnxQ>

to prepare new strategies for dealing with it to achieve the required change and make students feel the seriousness in applying the law.

Recommendations

1. Granting students legal immunities that protect them from authoritative pressures and preserve the independence of universities from any interference that may be exercised on them.
2. Training responsible university cadres for managing student partisan work to enact the new laws and regulations and involving political science and law professors in formulating new student work and council election systems.
3. Consolidating the cooperation between the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education to work with the deans of student affairs on the importance of student work for the democratic process in Jordan.
4. Amending student work practices and disciplinary systems per the Political Parties Law.
5. Subjecting the system of practicing student partisan activities, after its approval and implementation for a period of two years, to revision and measuring its impact to be amended accordingly, especially regarding the deanships' management of partisan activity, as well as systems of student work and council elections. A study of their impact on the level of participation in student work and youth participation rate in parties in general is of paramount importance.

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