

Is Jordan at risk of an Arab Spring?

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Abstract

The article presents an overview of the recent developments in Jordan, reviewing the demonstrations against the monarchy in the context of the Arab Spring. In this regard, the author argues that the protests herald serious change in the country; this is the first time in the 90-year history of the royal dynasty that people have called to topple the King. However, as the author highlights, there are many factors indicating that Jordanians are still loyal to their monarch and will not go to the extent of removing him. Moreover, the strong legitimacy that the King enjoys as the symbol of national unity makes any radical change unlikely. Even so, as the author concludes, the Jordanian monarch will not be able to continue enjoying an absolute monarchy, and futile political reforms will not satisfy the public appetite for political change.

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The loud calls in support of toppling the monarchy in usually peaceful Jordan have been interpreted by many as a sign of a Jordanian Arab Spring. For the first time, demonstrations shifted their focus from reforms of the regime to demanding an end to the reign of King Abdullah II, the descendant of a Royal dynasty that ruled the country for 90 years now. The expressions of anger reached a new pitch, personally insulting the King and breaking a major taboo, a breach severely punishable by law.

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However, many factors indicate that Jordanians remain loyal to their monarch and will not go to the extent of toppling him. The fear that the small and powerless kingdom could be dragged into the vicious circle of regional turmoil as seen in neighbouring Israel, Iraq and Syria, is still intimidating radical voices. The strong legitimacy that the King enjoys as a symbol of national unity makes any radical change improbable.

Still, no one can reassure the King that his reign will last for a long time. The unpredictability of the Arab uprisings makes everything possible. Who would have predicted the collapse of Syria into such a bloody crisis? For sure, the Jordanian

monarch will not be able to continue enjoying an absolute monarchy, nor hide behind futile political reforms. He must now take the loud voices of the street seriously. He has to bank on his significant and long established legitimacy in leading his kingdom towards real democratic change. In his controversial interview with *The Atlantic*, the Jordanian monarch expresses his anxiety that the Hashemite throne will not survive the Arab revolutions if he does not succeed in leading his country toward modernity. The harsh criticism expressed by the monarch in his assessment of the developments of the so-called Arab Spring reveal the extent of his discomfort in leading his country amid these emerging regional complexities.¹

If the uprisings that shook the Arab world in the last two years were in essence demands for dignity and better living conditions, the Jordanian unrest is an expression of the socio-economic malaise of a community sharply divided between two social classes, even two castes: those who can benefit from the modernity of the westernized but poor kingdom, manipulating a system of corruption and nepotism, and those who are living in humble conditions and have no access to this wealth.

This socio-economic divide is leading to a Jordanian society developing

¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Modern King in the Arab Spring", *The Atlantic*, 18 March 2013, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/monarch-in-the-middle/309270/>

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at two speeds and in two opposing directions. This divide now plays a much more important role than the traditional split between the two main components of the Jordanian society: the Palestinian descendants who fled Israel during various episodes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and those who claim being the authentic inhabitants of the country, popularly called the East Bankers.

Traditionally conceived as a time bomb, this divide does not carry much weight in the current crisis. On the contrary, the Palestinian Jordanian community is viewed as standing a step back from the more outspoken opposition against the King than the Jordanian tribes, the traditional backbone of the regime and its main beneficiaries, whose anger was exacerbated by what they view as a growing political role of Queen Rania, a Palestinian whose family

fled to the kingdom with waves of Palestinians leaving Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990. Their feeling of a new exclusion from the wealth of the political and economic elite surrounding the King is deepening the gap between the Hashemite monarchy and its traditional supporters.

The Election Law

Sparked by popular anger at the reduction in public fuel subsidies, the demonstrations in Jordan have lately reached a new pitch, calling for the ouster of King Abdullah II. But beneath the surface of these angry protests calling for basic needs are more radical demands, such as the need for the monarchy to move towards a modern democratic system where state institutions are more than a façade.

The excessive powers of the King, which allow him to dismantle Parliament and to form governments and sack them, has led to the stagnation of political life and the development of a pro-monarchy national media in which self-censorship and expressions of naïve loyalty to the Royal family are the norm.

King Abdullah II has responded to successive waves of protests by initiating low level socio-economic initiatives such as opening free housing for poor and a craftsmen's zone, as well as political reforms aiming to empower Parliament, but without

renouncing absolute prerogative over the political direction of the country. Key reforms have included changing 42 articles of the constitution, giving Parliament a say in forming cabinets - an unprecedented move - creating a constitutional court and an electoral commission to monitor the elections, new laws governing political parties and municipalities and a teachers' union for the first time in the history of the country.²

However, a radical change would necessitate the adoption of a modern election law allowing a vote based on electoral lists to replace the "one person one vote" system, which has led to a Parliament dominated by a blend of conservatives and tribal representatives. A law based on electoral lists would grant voters the opportunity to choose among diverse affiliations and to reconcile their political and their tribal/parental choices.

The one ballot vote increased the chances of tribal and family candidates to win the majority of seats in a society where tribal loyalties are primary. The new electoral law proposed by the government allows each voter a double vote, one for the district and another for a nationwide party list. This is a "formula that will have 82 percent of parliament elected according to the same old unpopular formula", according to

² Jamal Halaby, "Jordan's Islamists Rally for Elections", *The Associated Press*, 5 October 2012, at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/jordans-islamists-rally-against-elections>

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Marwan Muasher, the former foreign minister of Jordan and currently deputy head of studies at Carnegie international³. For Hammam Saeed, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan who called for a boycott of the elections, these reforms are simply "cosmetic and will only lead to a docile parliament".

The double vote is likely to prevent the most prominent opposition groups in Jordan from winning a large majority in Parliament on the basis of a national list, thereby stopping the Islamist party from confirming its place as a major player in the political decision making process.

The elections of January 2013 were presented by the regime as a gradual move towards greater democracy, a thesis rejected by the opposition, who boycotted the elections alleging electoral fraud.⁴ The turnout of 56.5 percent was presented as a popular endorsement of King Abdullah's reform track, hailed by the King as a "wonderful election outcome."

³ Marwan Muasher, "In Jordan, There's a Perception of Legitimacy", *The New York Times*, 28 August 2012, at <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/08/28/the-staying-power-of-arab-monarchies/in-jordan-the-monarchy-is-seen-as-legitimate>

⁴ See BBC coverage of the elections, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21158713>

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However, the large boycott by the opposition - the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF) and the Herak movement –lead to a new Parliament largely in line with the precedent, a blend of tribal loyalists and representatives of weak political parties.⁵

The monarchy's reforms must prove that it is still able to absorb the growing popular anger and to keep this emotion channelled at the legal and constitutional levels without allowing protesting crowds to take the lead, leading to dangerous implications for the survival of the regime and the stability of the kingdom. The parliamentary elections, in failing to bring real changes in the political landscape, could not amount to a real success in that sense.

⁵ See a report by CNN on the outcome of the elections, at <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/01/29/does-jordans-election-change-anything/>

The Absolute Monarchy

The Jordanian opposition is formed of different groups, mainly the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the leading opposition force in the country and the so-called the “National Front for Reforms” led by the former prime minister and head of intelligence Ahmed Obeidat, under the banner of the so called “November (2012) Burst”.⁶ The name is inspired by a similar movement that erupted under the late King Hussein in the South of Jordan in April 1989 as a protest against the rise of bread prices, called the “April Burst”. In the latest demonstrations, which are considered as the most radical in the history of the kingdom, the opposition called for an end to what they called “the Royal favours”, alluding to the initiatives taken by the King, viewed as gifts from the monarch to calm anger rather than a real will to implement reforms. Although calls to topple the King's rule were loud and clear, the leader of the National Front for Reform insisted a slogan for reform that opposed toppling the regime, thereby confirming the reluctance to move towards a radical approach.⁷ The Muslim Brotherhood did the same, thought the decision was at odds with their strong base of youth supporters, who are more enthusiastic about radical change.

⁶ See: *Blow in relation to the wind's blow*, at <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/173415>

⁷ See: <http://alhayat.com/Details/457166>

The demonstrations calling for the ouster of the king opened a new chapter in the Jordanian crisis. In the history of the kingdom, few have been able to challenge the legitimacy of the Royal family, of which any direct criticism is punishable by one to three years of prison under the so-called crime of “language abuse (disrespect)” (Italat al Lissan). This vague expression means nothing and everything. The King, who is above questioning, enjoys absolute powers including appointing and sacking governments, drafting, approving and implementing laws, calling for elections, dissolving the Parliament, nominating high security officials and judges of the Constitutional Court, and nominating and sacking members of the House of Lords, as well as judges of civil and religious courts.⁸

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The late King Hussein was able to bring together the contradictions of the small kingdom and to enjoy his large powers under the patriarchal image of the father of the community, but his son lacks his charismatic authority, and is ill-prepared to manage these conflicting interests.

⁸ See: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/173415>

According to the writer Hisham al Bustani, the old guard of King Hussein managed to keep links with the tribes while introducing their neo-liberal economic policies. The new guard of King Abdullah known for its westernized style and its eager for privatization policies led to a total rupture between the political and economic elite and the tribal base, according to the writer.

A Fragmented Opposition

However, the opposition has not established a strong position in this struggle and its ability to impose change is highly questionable. The Monarch is also playing the card of the street crowds, thousands gathering to voice their loyalty to the king side by side with angry crowds. The main opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, is divided between doves and hawks. The doves, represented by so called moderate Islamists, launched a “National Initiative for Building”, meant to be a positive move towards solving the crisis by consensus, though considered as a sign of internal dissent meant to weaken the main opposition group.⁹

The IAF, historically led by East Bankers with solid loyalty to the monarchy, has a large popular basis among Palestinians, especially from poor social classes, although this base had no real impact on the decision making processes of the front. The

⁹ See: <http://alghad.com/index.php/article/592213.html>

inability of the recent demonstrations to attract high numbers of participants strengthened the thesis of an internal divide among opposition's groups.¹⁰

The fragmentation of the opposition into diverse groups with no clear unifying agenda is weakening its ability to act as a lobbying group that is able to force the King to implement real reforms to limit his absolute power. The divide between the two groups, one for reform and the other for toppling the regime, further limits the ability of the opposition to impose real change. This situation is leading youth groups to resort to violence in their push for a radical change, a means of expressing their growing dissatisfaction with the socio-economic conditions. Unconfirmed information about a possible deal between Salafi Jordanians (radical Islamists) and the Jordanian secret services department, with a recent decision to free some of their prisoners in the regime's jails, was vehemently denied by the leader of the group.

The government's decision was interpreted as a move to gain the trust of the radical Islamic movement, in order to use it to counter the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood leading the protests¹¹. Even if some slogans called for the ouster of King Abdullah, this slogan is still highly

¹⁰ See: <http://alhayat.com/Details/457852>

¹¹ See: <http://aljazeera.net/news/pages/a32583d9-184d-4ee3-810a-218db64dad97>

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unpopular within the opposition's traditional leadership.

The rise of nationalist trends among Jordanians across different groups and social classes in recent years, which has been conceived as a tool to protect the fragile Jordanian identity from security threats and neighbouring conflicts, has ultimately hindered the political developments beyond nationalistic discourses. The legitimacy of the monarchy is the major pillar of this nationalistic trend.

The Jordanian regime managed to safeguard its own position along with domestic stability amid fierce regional struggles, and actively marketed its success at a national level, presenting itself as the only guarantor of national cohesion against regional hazards. This is even more relevant in the context of the bloody conflict in Syria. As Marwan Muasher, the former Jordanian foreign affairs minister wrote, "Jordan could be a model for what a successful "reform from above process would be like", arguing that the monarchy "is seen as legitimate by the overwhelming sectors of the population — and

necessary as a unifying force for the different ethnic groups in the country”.¹²

Endemic Corruption

The protests are essentially calling for parliamentary reforms and an efficient government that is able to plan and implement policies, as well as reforms to limit the powers of the General Intelligence Department (GID), conceived as the main decision maker in the country. In addition there are calls for the abolition of the State Security Court, which is responsible for dealing with cases of terrorism and attempted breaches of public security. However, the main slogan for the November protests was against corruption, a major epidemic during Abdullah’s reign.

In a country with limited resources and a national debt of more than 22 billion USD, the official response of increasing taxes and abolishing utilities subsidies led to an increase in prices and popular anger, who blame the corruption rates among the elite for this debt. The King responded to this popular outrage by confirming his support for anti-corruption measures, most of which were directed against members of the elite such as the former director of the secret services Mohamed al-Dahabi, who was arrested and tried and sentenced on several charges, including money laundering.¹³

¹² Marwan Muasher, *ibid.*

¹³ See: <http://www.albawaba.com/ar/slideshow/%D9%85%>

The unprecedented decision to issue an arrest warrant for King Abdullah’s fugitive uncle, Walid al Kurdi, who stands accused of embezzling hundreds of millions from Jordan’s phosphate industry, is a strong signal from the regime, asserting its commitment to combat corruption. In launching the slogan “no one is above the law”, the King has clearly demonstrated his commitment to this process. He has created specialized entities such as the independent anti-corruption committee, which works under the remit of the prime minister,¹⁴ although this process has been labelled as politicized and inefficient. This move is meant to enhance the public image of the monarch among East Bankers, the royalty main supporters recently voicing their opposition to the monarch policies.¹⁵

Calls for anti-corruption measures even targeted Queen Rania, whose growing authority and involvement in politics enraged tribes. In a letter to the King, dated February 2011, 36 tribal personalities and leaders asked the Monarch to give back the state’s lands and to return what was given

[D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-414147](http://www.jacc.gov.jo/%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-414147)

¹⁴ See: <http://www.jacc.gov.jo/%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-414147>

¹⁵ See the report by the Washington Institute for near East policy, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-jordan-be-the-first-arab-monarchy-to-fall>

The Queen's growing involvement in politics, going against the traditions of the kingdom, in addition to her Western lifestyle and international image are fuelling anger, especially within the community of the so-called original Jordanians.

to the Yassin family (the Queen's family) to the state's treasury, as the property of the Jordanian people. This unprecedented move from tribal leaders - breaching the most prominent taboo in the kingdom - was explained as the influence of the Arab Spring on Jordan's internal affairs.¹⁶

The Queen's growing involvement in politics, going against the traditions of the kingdom, in addition to her Western lifestyle and international image are fuelling anger, especially within the community of the so-called original Jordanians. The anger towards the Queen from Jordanians of Palestinian origin very much reflects the socio-economic divide between that group and those of Jordanian origins. For the latter group, the civil service is considered as the biggest employer, and who constitute the main corpus of the security forces, bound by strong loyalty to the monarchy.

16 See: <http://arabrevol.maktoobblog.com/29/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86/>

The Jordanian Palestinians, who make up the half of the country's population of 6.5 million, are the backbone of the country's private sector strongly supported by the King. This divide is currently expressed openly in the public sphere with radical voices calling for the safeguarding the country's wealth for its original inhabitants.

Abdullah II made liberal economic reforms the major goal of his rule from the start of his reign in 1999.¹⁷ It is important to note that according to the report by Transparency International, a global NGO that works to combat public sector corruption, Jordan dropped two points in the international indicator for corruption in 2011-2012.¹⁸ According to the Jordanian Ministry of Finance, in the first nine months of 2012, the country's loan-financed deficit stood at around 3.5 billion USD. The government was forced to raise prices by reducing subsidies in order to preserve economic stability and the Jordanian dinar.¹⁹ The price increase was necessary to secure a 2 billion USD loan from the IMF. Most importantly, it means that Jordan cannot continue to be managed by a "paternal" political system whereby the population relies on state support and state institutions.

17 See: <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/1242561>

18 See: <http://garaanews.com/jonews/garaanews-1/41609.html>

19 Marwan Muasher; *ibid*.

Conclusion

The candid yet extremely harsh comments made by King Abdullah to the Atlantic journalist on the post Arab Spring situation reflects the monarch's discomfort with the growing risk that Jordan will be engulfed by the regional turmoil. It also reflects his deep sense of being trapped, unable to undertake real reforms in his country. As brilliantly described by a longtime friend of the palace- in reply to a question posed by a journalist from the Daily Beast - "you get the impression what [the King] really wanted to say was, 'Damn, why couldn't I have inherited Sweden?'.²⁰

In an article published in Foreign Policy in 2004, King Abdullah II wrote "Jordan has already instituted its own reforms, including elections, measures to entrench basic political and human rights such as freedom of assembly and the press, and initiatives to empower women and youth. Other programs help build an effective political party system and strengthen an independent judiciary. In economic affairs, we have learned from the dismal examples of the 20th century. Public-sector enterprise alone simply cannot provide adequate opportunities for growing populations. Nations must

also look toward the private sector for job creation, innovation, and entrepreneurship".

Obviously, the enthusiasm of the Jordanian monarch for reforms has faded. Many Jordanians are equally lacking in enthusiasm. The king's previous optimism obviously does not match realities on the ground. However, the unfolding tragedy in Syria will always serve as a solid argument in support of internal reforms. Moreover, the fall of a "middle-income country with substantial state legitimacy, large bureaucratic institutions, and a strong military apparatus" would require "a lot of waves" according to Nicholas Seely in an article published in Foreign Policy²¹. In order for the King to limit the impact of these waves that will continue to rock his kingdom in light of the dramatic developments of the Arab Spring, he must act wisely and swiftly.

As Mr. Marwan Muasher rightly points out, "if reform from above has any real chance to succeed, it would be in Jordan". However, this necessitates "a dramatic shift of priorities by a system that has been so far resilient to serious change, a shift that can be led only by the king".²²

20 Christopher Dickey, "Jordan's King Abdullah Flames Out in Atlantic Interview", *The Daily Beast*, 20 March 2013, at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/20/jordan-s-king-abdullah-flames-out-in-atlantic-interview.html#url=/articles/2013/03/20/jordan-s-king-abdullah-flames-out-in-atlantic-interview.html>

21 Nicholas Seeley, "Jordan is not about to collapse", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 24 November 2012, at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/14/jordan_is_not_about_to_collapse

22 Marwan Muasher, *ibid.*