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The Myth of the Jordanian Monarchy's Resilience to the Arab Spring

Lack of Genuine Political Reform Undermines Social Base of Monarchy

Tamer Khorma

The political reforms announced by the Jordanian regime in 2012 were widely welcomed on the international diplomatic level. However, these reforms reflect neither the priorities of political forces, nor those of the masses. Critical changes are dominating the socio-political scene: a new sense of national identity, popular outrage over corruption, a wide-spread loss of faith in the state as a result of poverty, unemployment, and the sell-off of productive state-owned companies, and the aggravation of conflicts within the regime. Against this background, new social movements have emerged and have been able to remobilize the masses. This has been reflected in demonstrations by public employees and independent trade unions that have led to confrontations with the authorities. Thus, without concrete constitutional reforms to transition toward constitutional monarchy as well as substantial socio-economic reform, stability in Jordan cannot be guaranteed for long. As a consequence, European countries should not only encourage the Jordanian regime to institute genuine economic and political reform but also change their financial aid policies to support projects aimed at mitigating problems of unemployment and poverty.

The protests in Jordan may have dwindled over the past three years, but the slogans chanted in 2012 reflect a radical change in the sense of national identity. While Jordanians used to consider the palace and the king the symbols of their national identity, the introduction of neoliberal economic policies under King Abdullah since 1999 has not only led to conflicts within the regime but also affected how the palace is viewed by the people.

One of the most critical slogans chanted during weekly demonstrations in all major

Jordanian cities over the last three years was: "Our homeland Jordan preceded the Arab revolution." By referring to the uprising against the Ottomans during World War I and Jordan's existence as a homeland predating the monarchy, the slogan reflects a change that has taken place among Jordanians. Even people who never participated in the demonstrations compare King Abdullah's policies with those of King Hussein (reigned 1951–1999), who is considered a symbol of Jordanian identity. Jordanians use this comparison to express

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their opposition to King Abdullah's privatizations and other liberal economic policies. This topic dominates the few first minutes of any everyday discussion of political matters.

People in Jordan used to consider their king a patriarchal figure. That changed even before the Arab Spring. Eastern Jordanians used to ask the royal court for financial support, which was given as a royal endowment. However, people now demand that the government provide public services like education, healthcare, and social security rather than charitable hand-outs. Military retirees are one group that has adopted these demands, which also include calls to reduce economic inequality.

Conflicts within the Regime

The interview with King Abdullah published in April 2013 in *The Atlantic* hints at a growing conflict within the Jordanian regime between the neoliberals who dominate the economy and are now represented by the palace, and the bureaucrats, whom the king described as "dinosaurs." The bureaucrats consider themselves representatives of Eastern Jordanian tribes, who used to constitute the social base of the monarchy. Bureaucrats also dominated the public sector and the military until 1999, when the liberal economic course began. Although the bureaucrats have since lost power vis-à-vis the neoliberals, they still enjoy considerable influence within the regime and over the Eastern Jordanians. Once the guardians of the monarchy, King Abdullah now calls them the main challenge to his neoliberal policy.

This conflict within the regime reached a climax in May 2010, when military retirees published their first statement criticizing privatization, corruption, and the neoliberals' domination of business. Their statement reflected growing anxiety among the social base that used to support the palace. As a result of privatizations, Eastern Jordanians in particular have started to lose

their sense of social security, given that the majority of them used to work in the public sector, while Palestinian Jordanians (whose families lived in Palestine before 1948) mostly work in the private sector.

The anxiety was also driven by the policy of naturalization of Palestinians. The bureaucrats have argued since May 2010 that some wealthy Palestinians, who acquired Jordanian citizenship during the past ten years as a result of contacts and mutual interest with decision makers and have since joined the neoliberal camp, had used new citizenship to obtain political positions they did not deserve. The bureaucrats have also asserted that the naturalization policy has forcefully imposed Jordanian citizenship on Palestinians. Abdelhadi al-Majali, former speaker of parliament and one of the most prominent representatives of the bureaucratic old guard, criticized the Jordanian constitution's article on naturalization of Palestinians: "Jordanian citizenship was imposed on Palestinians, and this contradicts the right of the individual to choose his or her nationality." Major-General Mohammed al-Otom, spokesperson for the military retirees, defended this statement in April 2013, citing negative effects on both Palestinians and Jordanians.

These arguments became more pronounced only after the bureaucrats started losing their political influence within the regime, leading to what has been referred to as a "war" within the regime between the old guardians and the neoliberals. This was reflected, for example, in the 2011 struggle between the former president of the intelligence agency, General Mohammed al-Dhahabi, and these new actors. The general provided the daily *Al-Arab Al-Yawm* and several journalists (whom he bribed) with information about liberal figures involved in corruption. One of these was Khaled Shahin, a businessman who had been convicted in a corruption scandal concerning the expansion of an oil refinery. He was permitted to leave prison for medical treatment in the United States, but fled to Europe instead. Al-Dhahabi provided

Al-Arab Al-Yawm with Shahin's whereabouts and proof that he did not need medical treatment abroad. After publication of this information, demonstrations pressured the authorities to recapture Shahin. As a result of this and the publication of numerous other stories about corruption, the owner of *Al-Arab Al-Yawm* was forced to sell his newspaper under pressure from authorities. Even the paper's archive was deleted from the internet. Ironically, the general himself was arrested and convicted for money laundering.

The bureaucrats have the support of many Jordanian nationalist activists, who mobilized protests during the last three years. Activists have used the bureaucrats' opposition to the neoliberal camp in their own struggle against the monarchy. The bureaucrats have also used this common interest for their own benefit.

The Danger of Losing the Social Base

The old guardians, described by the king as "dinosaurs," have a strong influence on the masses. This means that the monarchy may start to lose its only social base if it continues the neoliberal economic approach and privatization policies. These policies may convince Washington that King Abdullah is making sound decisions, but they have been met with anger by the Jordanian population. Paradoxically, the old guardians who used to implement policies aligned with Western approaches actually turned out to be radical opponents of the West. Jordanians have come to associate economic problems with Western policies in the region. Since 2011 this has resulted in repeated demonstrations at the American embassy in Amman.

Eastern Jordanians are angry with the authorities not only because of their failure to reduce high unemployment and poverty and narrow the huge gap between salaries and prices, but also because of the authorities' direct involvement in corruption. The masses and military retirees alike have been angered by the sell-off of public insti-

tutions, which has been equated with corruption. One of the most important corruption scandals associated with privatization was the case of Waleed al-Kurdi, former CEO of the Jordanian Phosphate Mine Company. After siphoning off company profits for personal gain, he was able to flee to Britain, while authorities did little to enforce an arrest warrant. Even the historic headquarters of the General Command of the Army was sold, causing outrage among the military retirees and activists influenced by them.

Indeed, corruption has been the main catalyst for protests in Jordan over the past three years. "Ali Baba the second," a popular song chanted by the protesters, reflects their outrage. Based on the tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves, the song includes names connected to the palace and associated with corruption cases. The source of the information about these cases – which were made public and are thus known to every citizen in Jordan today – was the bureaucrats, of course. Yet, sacrificing scapegoats like General al-Dhahabi and Shahin before the Anti-Corruption Commission will not be enough to convince the masses that the regime is willing to seriously address corruption in its own ranks. Because of the unchecked power it holds, the monarchy is still held fully responsible for everything by the public.

The Arab Spring in Jordan

Socio-economic protests have a long tradition in parts of the country. For example, workers in the Ministry of Agriculture started a protest movement in 2006 that led to several labor demonstrations at the state companies being privatized. In 2009, the workers at al-Aqaba Port organized a huge protest, against which the security forces used disproportionate force. They even threw one worker from a moving car, and pursued the injured into the hospital, but the army, responsible for the hospital, prevented the gendarmerie from entering. This was the first conflict between the army and

the security forces in Jordan. Part of the middle class (which is mostly employed in the service sector) joined the movement in 2010, as teachers launched a major strike that spread all over the country.

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, new kinds of protests, more political in nature and focusing on constitutional reforms, have taken place. The activists who sparked the workers' protest in 2006 called the first demonstration of the Arab Spring. It took place in Dhiban, 70 kilometers south of Amman, in January 2011. A week later the same activists called for another demonstration in Amman. All seven opposition parties were hesitant about participating in the demonstration, but their youth organizations insisted on taking part. The parties ultimately decided to participate, but without making an official declaration, thus maintaining an ambiguous stance. The celebration in front of the Egyptian embassy when President Hosni Mubarak fell from power in February 2011 proved a critical juncture, as new actors who were more radical than the political parties appeared among the youth and started to form their own movements all over the country.

Political Parties vs. New Social Movement

Nonetheless, political parties started to dominate protests just a few weeks after the first demonstrations in 2011. Their slogans focused on demands for constitutional reforms, especially changes to the parliamentary election and political party laws. The Supreme Coordinating Committee for the Opposition Parties started to organize Friday demonstrations in Amman. This led to the formation of the National Front for Reform, which included all opposition parties but was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. All the parties except the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party left the Front in late 2012 because of disagreements regarding the Syrian crisis; while the Muslim Brotherhood supported

the Syrian opposition, leftist and nationalist parties supported the Assad regime.

While the Muslim Brotherhood considers itself a rival to the Jordanian regime, its primary demand at the time was to be a political partner and play a central role in decision-making. Other parties sought to gain a chance to enter parliament, insisting on reforms to the electoral and party laws and exerting great efforts to prevent the youth from crossing "red lines": some of the youth wanted to address the king directly in their slogans and call for the overthrow of the regime.

Youth movements often went beyond the reform approach adopted by the political parties, demanding limits on the power of the king and a stronger fight against corruption. These movements also called for social justice. The influence of the Egyptian revolution resulted in a mobilization of Jordanian youth for protests and network-building. These networks developed into several larger movements, such as the Free al-Tafayleh Neighborhood Movement, the Youth and Popular Movement in al-Karak, and the Sahaab Movement. These and other movements organized meetings and coordinated efforts to mobilize demonstrations in all major Jordanian cities under the same slogans and often simultaneously. These movements also used social media to exchange expertise with similar movements in Tunisia and Egypt.

In addition to youth movements, there were also numerous tribal movements, which represented Eastern Jordanian tribes all over the country. The Muslim Brotherhood contributed to establishing such movements, but the most important role was played by military retirees. The Muslim Brotherhood also tried to dominate the new popular movements, as evidenced in a demonstration on 24 March 2011 in Amman, in which one person was killed. The Brotherhood succeeded in mobilizing and leading the new movements in that demonstration, which was an imitation of the Tahrir Square demonstrations in Egypt. However, the driving forces of the new

movements felt that they were being used as tools of the Muslim Brotherhood, which as a result started to lose allies and support among Eastern Jordanians.

Political Decline and the Resurgence of the Social Movement

The social movement in Jordan that had formed even before the Arab Spring re-emerged visibly a few weeks after the November 2012 strike, the largest protest in the country since the onset of the Arab Spring. The strike, which took place all over the country and lasted for an entire week, was both political and social in nature. It was initially triggered by the prime minister's announcement of price increases on 13 November, but soon became a popular uprising demanding the overthrow of the regime. This was the first time that opposition parties, youth organizations, and tribal movements successfully mobilized almost the whole of the Jordanian electorate to participate in an uprising.

During the November strike, protests became more radical and a popular uprising became a growing possibility. Drawing comparisons to the deteriorating situation in Syria, the political parties sought to control the situation and prevent the strike from turning into a revolution. Despite the fact that its youth organization was directly involved in the radical protests, the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership put considerable effort into controlling events via the National Front in order to avoid any unexpected outcome of the spontaneous demonstrations. The Brotherhood wanted to send a message to the authorities and use the protests as a tool to apply pressure, but did not want the demonstrations to take a revolutionary turn. Members of the other parties in the Front sought to prevent people from chanting slogans calling for regime change.

However, the political parties were not effective in controlling the situation, and their efforts were limited to Amman. Two main factors functioned to prevent escala-

tion and led to a marked decline in the protests: the situation in Syria and the measured way in which the authorities dealt with the demonstrations, mostly avoiding bloodshed (unlike in neighboring countries). After the November 2012 strike the political movement declined as demands for social security and justice replaced calls for political and electoral reforms.

Yet fears about the Syrian crisis will not deter the masses for long. This was demonstrated in January 2014 in Maan, where an innocent citizen was killed by security forces in a raid. Angry demonstrations took place in the city, state buildings were burned, gunshots were fired at police stations, and nine people were killed by the security forces. Internal Affairs Minister Hussain al-Majali described the events as unparalleled in the country's history.

Reforms vs. Grassroots Ambitions

In August 2012, the US embassy in Amman expressed its appreciation of the road map for reforms put forward by King Abdullah. The 2011 road map included the formation of the National Dialogue Committee as well as promises to amend the constitution and reform parliamentary election and political party laws. However, the promised reforms have only been implemented in a superficial fashion. The government has been accused by various newspapers and political parties of impeding the king's reforms. Even if such reforms were enacted, they would fail to satisfy grassroots demands, as the people are more interested in fighting against corruption and enabling the state to own businesses and thus provide work opportunities. The authorities have failed to take any concrete steps to address the corruption and socioeconomic problems that sparked the protests in the first place.

The National Dialogue Committee, led by Taher al-Masri, then Chairman of the Senate, included opposition parties, experts, and national figures and concentrated largely on political goals, particularly election and political party laws. The Euro-

pean Union considered the establishment of the National Dialogue Committee and the Supreme Committee for the Parliamentary Elections as concrete steps toward democracy and reform. But the National Dialogue Committee was little more than decoration, as it had no decision-making powers. In addition, figures from the popular movements were notably excluded.

The election law, furthermore, provides no realistic opportunity for political parties to be elected to parliament; citizens have only one vote, which, according to long-standing social tradition, they give to their tribe's representatives, rather than to a political party. Thus, a party-based parliamentary system cannot be achieved unless a system of proportional representation that enables voters to elect tribal representatives as well as political parties is introduced. That is not foreseen, however. As a consequence, if the elected government promised by the king were ever to be established, it would be based on individual interests rather than political programs.

Remobilization

Despite the king's promises of reforms, economic problems have steadily worsened. The official unemployment rate is 11.8 percent, while youth unemployment has soared to over 30 percent. The authorities, optimistic because of the apparent calmness of Jordanian society, announced several price increases on basic products, most recently in January 2014. Consequently, after the decline of the political demonstrations, strikes ignited among the working class. Strikes have also flared up since December 2012 in state institutions, including the Customs Department, the Department of Statistics, the courts, and even the Ministry of the Interior. Independent trade unions have started to mobilize. Youth activists have started to collaborate with the workers' protests by offering logistic and organizational support.

Journalists organized their own demonstrations in 2012 against the new press

and publication law, which had led to the blocking of more than 200 websites. During these demonstrations, journalists declared their solidarity with the detainees of the November strike, who had been arrested on the orders of a military court. The youth activists also supported these demonstrations. Other protests organized by journalists centered on economic demands. Journalists, public employees, military retirees, workers, and the youth movements all worked together.

Implications of the Regional Situation

While the crisis in Syria prevented the November 2012 strike from escalating into an uprising, it is also fueling the conflict within the Jordanian regime and threatening the country's stability. The bureaucrats consider the neoliberals' policy on Syrian refugees a conspiracy against Jordanian identity (in mid-2014 Jordan was hosting some 600,000 registered Syrian refugees plus many more unregistered). The military retirees criticized the government's policy, describing it as a devious policy aiming to impoverish Jordanian citizens to force them to accept schemes targeting the country's existence and identity. In addition, decision-makers have been charged with corruption in connection with aid for Syrian refugees. Thus, the bureaucrats have been cultivating a perspective among the Jordanian grassroots that the neoliberals are not only selling off their country, but also stealing the financial aid that comes from abroad.

The danger of an escalation into a regional crisis was reflected in a June 2014 demonstration in Maan that declared solidarity with the Islamic State (IS). Abu Sayyaf, one of the jihadist leaders in Jordan, declared that the leadership is waiting for a fatwa on IS's declaration of an Islamic caliphate. IS announced that Jordan would be a target for suicide attacks. Jihadists would regard any political destabilization of Jordan as a great opportunity.

Scenarios

Three different scenarios seem to be plausible with regard to the future of the Hashemite Kingdom: substantial reforms and national compromise; the return of the old guardians; and the escalation of the protest movement into revolution.

Substantial Reforms, National Compromise

King Abdullah has declared several times that he is willing to lead the country towards a constitutional monarchy and a form of government that would give parliament real decision-making power. This would, however, require a strong will to achieve tangible reforms. Without such resolve, the parliamentary system will continue to be based on coalitions of individuals who are more interested in striking political deals for their own advantage than achieving political reform. The current system is also dominated by the executive and the intelligence agency, which restricts the independence of members of parliament. In Morocco, the king agreed to reduce his power by allowing a space in which political parties play a role, even if limited, in decision-making. King Abdullah may choose to undertake similar reforms in order to prevent the emergence of a new wave of radical protests.

Sharing power and responsibility with other political forces may not solve socioeconomic problems, but if these reforms are achieved, the palace would no longer be in a situation of confrontation with political forces and the masses. This would deter any spontaneous revolt and create a wider space for a real democratic system. By providing a chance for all social and political forces to participate in decision-making commensurate to their weight in society, tension within the regime would be eliminated, thereby ending the binary struggle between new liberals and old bureaucrats. For example, in 1989 a political opening successfully prevented the major April strike, centered on social and economic

demands, from turning into an insurrection. Such an approach may work again, but more concrete steps toward a parliamentary and constitutional monarchy would be necessary.

Return of the Old Guardians

The bureaucrats, or old guardians, seek to regain the power they had in the past, and thus consider the popular anger over economic policy as a tool that might re-empower them. A new wave of large-scale protests could thus become the entry point through which the bureaucrats succeed in their attempts to dominate the regime again – as they would be needed to control the situation before it reached a critical point because they still control the security apparatus and might be able to influence the Eastern Jordanians.

In such a situation, the bureaucrats might be able to accomplish their goal and win the struggle against the neoliberal actors within the regime. At the same time, a more democratic order would definitely not be achieved if the bureaucrats dominated the decision-making process. Rather, they might well impose martial law (as was considered in 2012) as a way to consolidate their newly regained power and prevent the outbreak of a revolution.

Escalation of Protest

Contrary to the announcements of the authorities, current decisions and policies show that the state is moving in the opposite direction from democracy-building or even political liberalization. Yet, the monarchy may not be able to control the situation if faced with a new wave of large-scale protests, as the military has no interest in fighting at the neoliberals' side.

The new driving forces of the protest movement, particularly the youth movements and the tribal movements, are more radical than the political parties, and more likely and better able to lead a protest movement that would call for the over-

throw of the regime rather than just for political reform. If a full-scale revolution involving almost all sectors of society emerges, it is likely that inhabitants of Palestinian refugee camps would also participate, given that the camps participated actively in the November strike. While Palestinians are unlikely to initiate any uprising on their own, if a wide-ranging insurrection is sparked by other societal actors, the Palestinian camps might well join in.

At that point, it would be difficult for even the bureaucrats to guide the trajectory of the protests in their desired direction. The situation might be aggravated not only by regional and international interference but also by the repercussions of the Syrian crisis, in particular radical Salafist jihadist organizations fighting there but based in Jordan. Such a scenario might seriously threaten the survival of the monarchy and even the state.

Alternatively, a national front might be formed that unites social and political forces to confront radical Islamist organizations and fight for popular demands at the same time. This front would embrace activists who already have deep contacts with the grassroots and notable experience in mobilizing people and coordinating with different societal forces.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In the end, maintaining the current political order will threaten the stability of Jordan, while sharing responsibilities and limiting the power of the king would enable Jordan to be more resilient in the face of escalating protests and an increasingly turbulent region. To achieve this, concrete steps toward democracy should be taken. First, the challenge of corruption needs to be addressed. The regime should move beyond prosecuting isolated cases and demonstrate a strong willingness to fight systemic corruption. One step in this direction would be to empower the Anti-

Corruption Commission and make it an effective oversight body, monitoring all state institutions.

Second, a genuine national dialogue in which all social and political actors participate should be conducted to discuss political and economic priorities and constitutional reforms. The decisions of such a conference or series of conferences should be taken seriously to avoid the palace being seen as opposed to the popular will. Even if economic problems persist, it would be easier for people to accept them if they see them as a result of their own decisions.

Third, the abolition of military courts and the expansion of civil liberties would be important signals to activists and the public alike that there is a real will for reform of the system.

Fourth, the government should avoid involvement in wider regional crises.

Fifth, the issue of social justice needs to be taken seriously. The widening gap between prices and salaries, as well as the privatization of state companies, education, and health services, have created apprehension within society, and the lack of public transportation makes the situation even worse. These problems have always been the primary concerns of the grassroots.

As a consequence, European countries should not only maintain pressure on Jordan for genuine political reform but also focus on supporting concrete, productive projects to mitigate problems of unemployment and poverty. In this, it is important that the state is seen as playing an active and positive role in fighting corruption, generating employment, and running productive projects.

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