

Report

Jordan: The Difficult Path towards Reform

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The political situation in Jordan is no different from that of other Arab countries which have experienced revolutionary uprisings over the past two years. In particular, strong similarities exist in terms of political despotism, absolute autocracy and the emergence of a ruling elite. This elite that is dominating the country's economy and administration, is practicing widespread corruption, losing touch with the public and limiting public freedoms through temporary laws that are literally and essentially, contradictory to the constitution of the country. Also, such elites are suppressing political opposition and, by using various media to defend themselves from allegations of despotism and corruption, are seeking to obstruct demands for comprehensive reforms and change and demands for the punishment of those involved in corruption and the repayment of embezzled public money. The aim is to defame the advocates of reform in general and their leadership in particular. The ruling elite has resorted to using old-fashioned ways to gain sympathy from Jordanian tribal groups by urging them to declare their loyalty to King Abdullah II in an attempt to conceal the reality of its corrupt and arbitrary practices.

Forces of Change

These forces can be summarised as follows:

1. The Islamists are at the forefront of these forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood and its political party, the Islamic Action Front. This party is known to have obtained, in the first fair parliamentary elections held in the country in 1989, about twenty per cent of the vote. They also had significant representation in the Jordanian parliament, with a number of deputies.

There is no doubt that the events of the past two years in some Arab countries, and the role of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in demanding constitutional reform that aims to make the people of Jordan the source of sovereignty and power, has increased their popularity. These demands include the abolition of the notorious election law known as the 'law of one vote'. This law promotes tribalism and distorts the true representation of people. In addition, their steadfastness and consistency in demonstrating and protesting every Friday over the past two years has had a significant impact on people acknowledging them. This has expanded their influence amongst the public. The daily newspaper – al-Sabeel - kept speaking for them and expressing their views. Also, The Jordanian TV channel 'al-Yarmuk' speaks in their name and promotes their ideas and the public's demands which they are calling for.

It is true that the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the mistakes they have made, have, to some extent, negatively impacted on their popularity. Additionally, media campaigns launched by successive Jordanian governments over the past two years, have contributed to weakening their public

influence. However, it can be argued that they enjoy no less than thirty per cent of public support.

2. All other Islamist groups combined, including Salafist organisations and al-Wasat Islamic Party, enjoy no more than five per cent of the people's support.
3. The National Front for Reform, headed by lawyer Ahmad Obeidat, the former prime minister, includes the Islamic Action Front and the following nationalist parties: The Arab Ba'ath Progressive Party, the National Action Party and the National Democratic Public Movement Party. The left-wing parties are: the Jordanian Communist party and the Democratic Unionist Party, the Jordanian Democratic People's Party (Hashd), the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party and the Progressive Party. This front represents trade unions in the country and independent non-partisan social forces. Since its establishment on 19 May 2011 until today, this front has not hesitated to demonstrate and protest in the Jordanian capital and the other major cities of Zarqa, Irbid, As-Salt, Karak, Ma'an and Tafileh every Friday after the noon prayers.

Since 14 November 2012, after Dr. Abdullah al-Nosour's decision to raise the price of petroleum and his declared intention to increase the price of electricity and water, the pace and vigor of these demonstrations has increased. Consequently, tens of thousands of ordinary people and state employees who will be affected have joined the demonstrations demanding a change of decision. The casualties in these demonstrations and the heightened intensity and immensity, however, did not lead the government to take any action to change its unjust decisions. It used the immense shortage in the state's budget, as well as unfulfilled promises by Gulf Arab states to financially support Jordan, as a pretext to uphold their decision. This stance and attitude has seen the emergence of angry masses demanding the overthrow of government and insulting King Abdullah, which then led to the arrest and detainment of tens of protesters across the cities and villages of the country.

The Anti-Reform Forces

These forces can be classified as follows:

1. Tribal leaders: It is known that Jordan, like other Arab countries, is a society which consists of tribes, clans and influential families. Such tribes have leaders who, for several decades, have been receiving monthly grants (that is, salaries), from the royal court, to ensure their loyalty to the Hashemite royalty, that can then use them when needed. Since the 1950s till today these leaders have faithfully expressed their loyalty whenever the regime is confronted with a crisis. However, these leaders do not enjoy wide public support, not even amongst their tribes and clans, but the policies of government always attempt to deploy the tribal spirit in various ways and means – to its advantage.

2. Thousands of military retirees meet in private clubs allocated for their use in the main cities of Jordan. They comprise two groups: the first has joined those advocating for reform, comprehensive change and the fight against corruption. It has played a significant role in the protest momentum and popular demonstrations over the past two years. The other group mostly consists of beneficiaries who have obtained jobs in the state through favouritism, nepotism and tribal pressures. Senior retirees have occupied important positions in the state, such as governors, ambassadors and management of independent administrative institutions. Those have long expressed support for the king and for measures taken by the various governments, through statements and press releases.
3. Groups benefiting from the state of despotism and corruption in the country ,including most of the prime ministers who have held these positions throughout the reign of King Abdullah, since 1999 until today. It also includes many members of the House of Representatives as well as the House of Senate. They were elected during that period, with the support of the Royal Court as well as the General Intelligence, by fraudulent means, or were appointed in the House of Senate on recommendation from the General Intelligence.

Some of these groups have formed political parties, notably the National Constitutional Party which is considered one of the largest groups among these assemblies. There are a number of political parties, in these groups, that are financially backed by the Jordanian regime. However, they have few supporters and do not enjoy much popular support. Rather, in their electoral campaigns, they rely on the support of the General Intelligence and electoral fraud.

4. The official forces of oppression and repression include the General Intelligence Department, the Public Security Force, police forces and the armed forces. The loyalty of such forces and systems, to the king, is guaranteed. Also, they do not hesitate suppressing any public actions, if requested to do so.
5. It is worth noting that these forces have acted rationally over the past two years without showing a sign of weakness or reluctance in their duty in dealing with the protesters who have showed determination to mobilise in a peaceful manner and attempting not to clash with the police. Despite this, these forces have resorted to intimidating and terrorising protesters, assaulting them with the aid of groups loyal to the regime, or attempting to disperse many popular sit-ins in the capital and other cities. This has resulted in a few deaths on both sides, albeit a large number of injuries.

Governmental Reforms and Demands for Change

Since coming to power in 1999, till today, King Abdullah has emphasised the need, in the books of commissions directed at the prime ministers, for comprehensive reforms as well as the fighting of corruption, yet with no notable progress on the ground.

Since the beginning of 2011 the protests in Jordan have been marked by calls for comprehensive reforms and change. The Government of M'arouf al-Bakhit responded to the demands by forming the 'National Dialogue Committee', headed by Taher Masri, the head of the House of Senate. The committee has been assigned to discuss the election law and the law of parties. The Islamic Action Front party, the largest political party in the country, has refused to participate in this committee which it considers the circumvention of public demands and an attempt to distract the people. The commission, due to the composition and quality of its members, lack of representation of Jordanian political forces and forces in support of reforms, has also been criticised by prominent Jordanian figures.

This committee was followed by the formation of the Royal Commission for Reviewing the Constitution in late April 2011, headed by Ahmed Lawzi, a prime minister during the reign of King Hussein. The aim was to take into account the recommendations, which are concerned with constitutional amendments relating to election and parties' laws, issued by the National Dialogue Committee. The National Dialogue Committee submitted its proposals on 5 June 2011, and it included a draft law concerning the political parties and proposals concerning parliament members, and recommended the abolishment of some constitutional amendments that are inconsistent with democracy.

In the meantime, on 19 May 2011, an agreement was reached between the forces of reform to form the 'National Front for Reform', and to agree to its executive committee that would consist of twenty-five members who are representatives of political parties, trade unions and political and independent social forces. Its chairmen, Ahmad Obeidat, in a press release which was published in local newspapers on 10 August 2011, criticised the constitutional amendments proposed by the Royal Commission for Reviewing the Constitution. He considered the amendments to be superficial and inadequate, as they do not address the government's essence of absolute autocracy and do not meet the demands of the Jordanian people.

The House of Representatives and the House of Senate discussed the proposals made by the Royal Commission and approved it without making changes. It was then given to the King for endorsement, and was published on 1 October 2011.

Ever since, the protests have been fixated on fighting corruption. As a result security agencies began to terrorise protestors, like what happened in the two festivals in Salhob

and Mafraak. October 17, 2011, marked the resignation of al-Bakhit's government resulting in the King commissioning Awn al-Khasawneh – a judge in the International Court of Justice in The Hague – to form a new government. The King emphasised, in the book of commissions, the priority of executing legislations and laws aimed at ensuring political order; particularly election and party laws. The new Council of Ministers approved the Independent Commission's elections bill which stipulates the formation of a council of commissioners, consisting of five members that were to be appointed by the King on 27 December 2011 for this purpose. The government passed the 2012 political parties bill to parliament, which was published by local newspapers on 2 February 2012. The bill of elections law was submitted to the National Assembly in which it was approved on 18 March 2012 and published in local newspapers on 20 March 2012.

On 19 April 2012, the National Front for Reform party issued a statement that the election law, passed by the National Assembly, negates the idea of reform. Hence it was rejected by the Islamic Action Front in a statement issued on 10 April 2012.

In late April 2012, Khasawneh's government resigned as a result of pressures exercised by the royal palace, and Fayez Tarawneh was commissioned to form a new government. The protestors responded to that by demanding the removal of the House of Representatives, and the formation of a national salvation government. The demands also revolved around making radical changes to the constitution which would guarantee the people are the source of authority, making the House of Representatives the baseline in the formation of governments. Accordingly, accountability should be judged by the House of Representatives, rather than the King. Tarawneh's government was formed on 2 May 2012. Consequently, Jordanian newspapers published statements made by the resigned Prime Minister of Jordan, 'Awn al-Khasawneh, in which he said that there are three governments in the country which are contesting the executive branch, namely, the government of the royal court, the government of general intelligence and the official government.

During Tarawneh's office in government, on 7 May 2012 the king appointed the Independent Board of Commissioners council for election. On 6 June he endorsed the laws of the constitutional court and political parties and the election law on 28 June. As a result, vast popular protests broke out in the country. The opponents of these laws launched a sweeping media campaign in local newspapers, as well as on local and Arab TV channels. In an interview on the 4 July, 'Awn al-Khasawneh, the resigned prime minister, criticised the election law and said that reform in Jordan is being managed through security measures. Hence, he joined those calling for comprehensive reforms and change.

Upon the insistence of the King and Tarawneh's government, according to the new law, parliamentary elections, the National Front for reform declared their boycott of upcoming parliamentary elections on 23 July. 500 Jordanian national, partisan and union figures issued a memorandum to the King on 28 July, demanding that the election law be aborted and asking him to issue a new election law which would truly represent the people. The King, however, ignored the memorandum. On 9 September the National Front for Reform party condemned the official political, economic and social approach. On 5 October, in a week referred to as the 'National Salvation Week', seventy four parties and political, social and unionist organisations protested against the regime's disregard of public demands.

On 6 October the King appointed the nine members of the constitutional court, headed by the judge Tahir Hikmat. The government of Tarawneh resigned and the resignation was accepted. On 11 October the King commissioned Abdullah al-Nosour to form a new government. It was surprising that five of the nationalist and leftist parties (that is, the Communist Party, the Arab Ba'th Progressive Party, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, the nationalist movement and the Jordanian Democratic People's Party) expressed their willingness to participate in the parliamentary elections on 11 November. This situation came as a result of the disagreement between the parties and the Islamic movement on what is happening in Syria.

Protests and marches swept across the country a day after the government of al-Nosour announced the raising of the price of petrol on 14 November. The protestors' demands revolved around overthrowing the government and pushing it to cancel this decision. Official media, in turn, launched an attack on the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Front for Reform. The protests were accompanied by attacking and burning some government facilities and buildings and the destruction of others and destroying private property. Forty-five members of the Muslim Brotherhood, amongst others, were arrested following the protests. The protesters accused the security, pro-regime forces and some unemployed youth for these attacks. The pro-regime and security forces were also accused of attacking the headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front Party across the capital and in major cities.

Ironically, on the evening of 28 November, the 'National Forum of General Intelligence Retirees' issued a statement referring to the critical situation besetting the country as a result of excessive corruption in the institutions of the state. Firstly, this is corruption of a political nature, as well as the miserable failure of managing the state that has come to be dominated by opposing factions.

Matters got more complicated when the government declared running parliamentary elections on 15 January 2013. As a result of protests, over raising the price of petrol, the

five nationalist and leftist parties declared their boycott of the parliamentary elections, calling off their previous decision.

What is happening is that there is a tendency by the regime to deal with this popular momentum by ignoring public demands. It rather deals with it uncompromisingly, through arrests and using tribal leaders and thugs. This trend is indicative of the fact that Jordanian society and the future of Jordan as a people and nation, have been deluded and misled, which may carry serious repercussions.

The Path for Change

It is known that in Jordan people and their representatives do not play a role in the formation and dissolving of ministries before and after the amendment of the constitution. Governments come and go and no one knows what brought them and what caused them to resign. Opponents of reform also oppose fighting corruption, because they are loyal to and protectors of the King. In reality, however, they are really loyal to the King for self-serving interests and they cannot really protect the King and in fact they cause him harm because they are the protectors of corruption and those involved in it. Hence, they are the biggest threat to the King.

It is noted in cases that the 'Anti-Corruption Commission' considers corruption there may be attempts to complicate matters further. This includes focusing on junior staff and complicating the conditions of grants and other minor aspects. This thus creates an atmosphere of frustration among Jordanian citizens who are waiting desperately to see major corruption cases investigated, such as commissioning the registration of the state's territories, the privatisation of the phosphate, mining, electricity, water and communications companies, money laundering, selling citizenship and selling properties belonging to al-Abdali and al-Dabouck in Amman.

Possible Future Scenarios

1. The continuation of the status quo that is, not responding to public demands for reform and fighting corruption. If the King and successive governments are to keep insisting on this stance, then the stability of Jordan and its security is likely to be under threat. When held early next year, the parliamentary elections are expected to result in a weak parliament which is unable to supervise any government and meet public demands in terms of constitutional, economic and administrative reforms, fighting corruption and poverty and facing widespread unemployment.

Subsequently, protests may not stop, in which case the King may resort to the use of force and violence to suppress this momentum, ignoring human rights and challenging the provisions of the constitution. This will probably trigger a negative

image of the regime at the Arab and international levels. The King may be motivated to take this stance by a statement made by the American ambassador in Jordan more than a month ago, that the amendments made to the Jordanian constitution are adequate and meet the demands of the Jordanian people.

2. Embarking on acceptable amendments to the Jordanian constitution if the upcoming parliamentary elections result in enough influential representatives joining the parliament, who may help put pressure on the King and his government to make acceptable amendments. This may not meet all the demands of the protestors, although it is considered an acceptable settlement, especially if it is coupled with bringing some of the senior figures to justice, which would also see the retrieval of some public funds that have been embezzled. The arrival of promised financial aid, from some Gulf Arab states, may contribute to reaching this settlement. This is likely to contribute to reducing unemployment and poverty.

Perhaps the message of King Abdullah, sent to the Prime Minister, Dr Abdullah al-Nosour on 8 December 2012 to form a royal commission, might enhance the regime's integrity. The commission, to be headed by al-Nosour, would include eleven personalities. This is an indication that the Jordanian crisis is on the path to a resolution as far as this scenario is concerned.

3. The issue of meeting all demands, that is, comprehensive reforms as well as fighting against corruption. This scenario relies on whether the current economic and social conditions will continue until next year. It also depends on running parliamentary and municipal elections, which may bring those supporters of the regime involved in corruption to power. This might lead to an escalation of popular protests, in that the protests may take a much wider scope that the security forces will not be able to control. Consequently the King might be forced to meet popular demands and hence carry out the required constitutional amendments, as well as pass a new election law which would allow for the true representation of people in the House of Representatives and the House of Senate. A government may be formed as a result of fair elections, which would bring those involved in corruption to justice and would retrieve the embezzled funds back to the treasury and establish a state of law and true citizenship, where Jordan can enjoy security and stability.

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