

Position Paper

Jordan's Struggle over the Rules of the Political Game

Al Jazeera Center for Studies



The rules of the political game in Jordan no longer appeal to the major powers. The Muslim Brotherhood; *Jabhat al-Islah* ("the Reform Front"), led by former prime minister and Director of General Intelligence Department Ahmad Obeidat, and other movements announced their boycott of the January 2013 parliamentary elections. This indicates that these active groups refuse to take part in political games in which they have not formed the rules. It does not, however, indicate that the political regime is in critical condition; in fact, it continues to maintain its fundamental structure through internal and external consensus.

Survival first

There are three dimensions that states interact in and stipulate the pattern of their conduct. The first is the internal dimension which is centrally embedded in the political system and society. Internal stability depends on the degree of harmony between the priorities of the political system and those of the society. The second is the regional dimension. This denotes the adjacent region (where borders are shared), and the neighbouring region with which the state has interacted with throughout its history. At this level, the priorities are manifested through the establishment of a network of interactions with the 'adjacent and neighbouring' dimension to ensure the priorities of the political system and society in the first dimension are attained. Last but not least is the international dimension. This consists of other states, international organisations and international law and overlaps with the second-dimension so as to serve the priorities of the first dimension.

Hence, the priorities of the first dimension (i.e. political order and society) are the decisive factors when analysing state conduct. This is because the political system (the regime) in all states has two priorities: the formulation of a strategic vision, and the quest for survival while societal priorities are centered around growth and development on all levels.

When analysing political behavior in Jordan, it seems that regime survival outweighs all other matters specific to the state or society. This can be observed in the following:

- 1) Institutions such as the army and other security apparatuses that are imperative to the state's preservation of power represent the key mechanism for regime survival, which ensures their loyalty through uneven distribution of benefits. This is particularly the case when comparing what these institutions receives to what society receives. It is sufficient to allude to the fact that when Jordan ended its state of war against Israel and relinquished the West Bank, the rate of defense expenditure in relation to the GDP placed Jordan amongst the fifth highest in the world. While the global average defense expenditure is 2.2% of GDP, in Jordan it is at 6.2%. Also, defense expenditure rose from \$210 million in 1995 to more than a billion dollars in 2009 (a fivefold increase), while GDP in the same period rose from six to twenty-five billion dollars, a lower increase-ratio than the that of defense expenditure. Defense expenditures makes up approximately the equivalent of 19.95% of total government expenditure.

If we were to compare the share of expenditure of the institutions that are central to the state with growing debts, we would find that the priority of regime survival surpasses social priorities. There are reports indicating the rise of debt to more than 22 billion dollars, meaning that the rate of debt has exceeded 70% of the GDP.

The previous figures suggest that there is a problem with the fact that the regime has prioritised its survival over social growth. Cohesion between the regime and society has been affected due to the disparity of priorities which has become more acute than ever before.

- 2) Occupational mobility in positions of power: Jordan is considered to be one of the countries with the shortest government lifespan with the average government's lifespan

being less than ten months. If we were to add to that the changeover rate of people in high level positions of power in the royal court, governors, university presidents, and others, the features of a political elite appear exhausted by the game of musical chairs. Loyalty has become a critical factor that outweighs efficiency and integrity; the former contributes to the survival of the regime, while the latter may push towards serious reforms.

Linked to this is electoral systems on which political debates are often centered. While political order calls for national unity, social cohesion and the development of civil society, it incorporates electoral systems to ensure control over less assured areas of loyalty amongst certain groups (e.g. Circassians, Chechens, Christians, Bedouins, women, etc.) and the division of departments in a way that bases the criteria of how seats are distributed on geography rather than demography. This is done to ensure that forces that the regime sees as being more likely to support it are granted more authority. Therefore, it avoids electoral systems that could potentially undermine subsidiary loyalty and restore political congestion.

However, general internal attitudes indicate a realisation shared by both the opposition and pro-government forces: that the monarchy is the least risky option in light of the current circumstances, and that any attempt to export political activism from the level of reform to that of change is an uncertain political endeavour. Although the regime acknowledges this prevalent view, without the unquestioned support of state institutions that can enforce its power and longevity, it remains insecure.

Risks posed by neighbours

Three regional factors play a role in the relative stagnation of the local environment. These are:

- concerns about the alternative homeland;
- the escalation of the Syrian crisis and its impact on the borders between the two countries
- the resurfacing of armed Islamist movements, especially the Salafi trends, which are the least willing to adapt to the necessities of realities on the ground.

It should be noted that the factors in the adjacent and regional dimension pose a risk to the political institution, the regime, or both. It appears that political order is trying to adapt to these factors in spite of the fact that political and economic capabilities are limited.

It seems that economic limitations limit the options of the political order, thus causing a state of uncertainty. Some of the GCC countries, it seems, want Jordan to be a significant actor in the Syrian crisis in exchange for economic support. However, Jordan is concerned with what the implications of the Syrian crisis will be on it especially after the emergence of Salafi organisations that have occasionally announced that Jordanian 'martyrs' have fallen in the Syrian conflict. But it appears that these Salafi combatants join the battlefield via Turkey, reducing the involvement of Jordan while keeping their organisations away from the Jordanian social and political landscape.

With regards to the alternative homeland anxiety, it appears to still be confined within the boundaries of theoretical argumentation in spite of the expressions of fear that arise every now and then through the data of some semi-official institutions or the literature of some cultural elites that delve into history in an attempt to consolidate evidence for the historical presence of the current political entity to illustrate the fears of the collective subconscious about the fate of the country.

Anxiety of decline

It may be necessary to return to Jordan's history in the context of the Great Arab Revolt in 1916 to discover the role of the international factor in the survival of the regime. The Great Arab Revolt aimed to establish one Arab state that would unite all the Arab countries in Asia. But the evolution of the position and role of the Saudi royal family in the Arabian Peninsula affected the status of the Hashemites and undermined their presence at the end of the 1920s. The United States' involvement influenced this development, and the project for a unified Arab state became limited to the regions of the Fertile Crescent and Iraq, where, later, French colonisation excluded both Syria and Lebanon. The project was then reduced to Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. With international support, the Zionist project managed to erode the great Arab state project for the third time by occupying 78% of Palestine in 1948. The fourth stage in the series of decline came with the Iraqi coup against the Hashemites in 1958. The project thus shrunk to only Jordan and the West Bank. The fall of the West Bank to Zionist occupation in 1967 witnessed the fifth stage of decline and, consequently, left the current Jordanian political entity as the last stage of the Great Arab State project. This historical experience is what gave rise to an obsession with and mentality of survivalism.

The American way of dealing with Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Ali Abdullah Saleh and even the Shah of Iran alludes to the fact that "American pragmatism" may go beyond what friends think. This is portrayed in the words of the American philosopher, John Dewey: "If the idea of God is useful then god exists, and if it is not useful then God does not exist."

Shock absorber

It does not seem that the Arab Spring will reach Jordan due to the strong connection between the regime and state institutions that are able to maintain power, the Palestinian component's bewilderment by its most appropriate option, the elite-driven nature of the political activism and fragmentation of the Jordanian component, and the very cautious pragmatism of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, the Achilles' heel in the country is the economic crisis that may affect the internal political map and, according to the International Transparency Corruption Index, long existing corruption. That explains why most of the slogans promoted through political action call for social reform, particularly with regards to corruption and unemployment.

It seems that the last four governments (i.e. those of Marouf al-Bakhit, Awn al-Khasawneh, Fayez al-Tarawneh and Abdullah Ensour) demonstrated the very limited power of all authorities outside the palace. Al-Khasawneh's statement to *The Economist* after his resignation ("I was supposed to run the country...I won't accept instructions from the palace."¹) is indicative of the real decision-making circles in the country. This means that any attempt to analyse the country's crises based on assumed roles by executive or legislative authorities will only lead to more dilemmas because the government and institutions, according to a western diplomat, "are the barriers and the shock absorbers" between the public and the palace.

It seems that this absorption barrier between the people and the palace has begun to gradually erode and shrink, and the language of sloganeering, and even unprecedented insults, mark the beginning of a new political era which will need some time to former an organised body, especially if it joins forces with figures who managed to gradually 'free themselves' from the 'sins' of the political system they emerged from.

The boycott of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Jabhat al-Islah* and other movements of the upcoming elections in January suggests that organisational bodies have begun to take

¹ "The king's sad men," *The Economist*, 5 May 2012, 15 Nov. 2012, < <http://www.economist.com/node/21554229>>.

shape despite the announcement made by the body in charge of organising the elections that the rate of enrolment has reached 70%. This, however, does not imply that the regime is in a critical condition; as a matter of fact, it has gone back to its game of musical chairs and will eventually set up "shock absorbers" once again.

The balance of power is in favour of the regime at the moment because it not only has the support of the centres of power that can maintain its position, but also holds resources and the internal consensus on its legitimacy. Furthermore, the opposition is not united and does not have a common strategy that could threaten the regime's survival. This does not imply that external risks do not endanger its existence but that the removal of the regime would not serve the interests of major international powers.

Therefore, the strategy of survival will still rule in the foreseeable future even if some temporary oscillations occur where the priorities of society and state outweigh the survival of the regime.

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