

Jordan of the Future

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On June 12th 2011, King Abdullah announced that he supported proposals for a new electoral system and a political party's law suggesting that the country was moving towards forming parliamentary governments. "The (election) law should guarantee the fairness and transparency of the electoral process through a mechanism that will lead to a Parliament with active political party representation; one that allows the formation of governments based on parliamentary majority and political party manifestos in the future", Abdullah declared. This important statement was ignored by a skeptical public—tired of unfulfilled declarations and promises. Yet the speech marked for the first time, since succeeding his father to power in 1999 that King Abdullah actually agreed to changes that could lead the country into a representative parliament and an accountable government.

Jordan's only experience with a parliamentary-majority government in 1956 ended when the late King Hussein, suspecting a political coup backed by the Pan Arabist Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, disbanded the parliament and imposed martial law.

Hussein restored parliamentary life in 1989 following popular protests against International Monetary Fund (IMF), imposed austerity measures in 1989 and revoked the martial two years later.

But it is still unclear that his son's 2011 declaration would represent a new historic turning point.

King Abdullah has yet to prove that he can deliver: he will have to seriously back meaningful reforms to succeed in the face of forces inside the establishment that are vehemently resisting change. But he also has to come under external and internal pressures to undertake changes especially as the U.S. made it clear that financial support to the Kingdom was dependent on initiation of political reforms.

The Arab uprisings have convinced the U.S. that it could lose its key allies in the region if these regimes do not take steps to appease rising popular anger. Meanwhile, King Abdullah has also concluded that the U.S. may well look for an alternative if he does not seize the initiative and start an albeit "controlled reform process".

Mixed Signals

Protests in Jordan against repression, corruption and economic policies started prior to the eruption of Arab revolutions. But the fall of the autocratic Tunisian, and especially Egyptian presidents, emboldened Jordanians to increase popular pressure demanding an end to corruption, restraining of the powerful security agencies, a fairer electoral system, and crucial constitutional amendments.

Although the protests have not turned into mass rallies there is hardly a day that passes in Jordan without at least five or more demonstrations taking place in Amman or across the Kingdom. At one point in May there were at least 400 sit-ins – mostly demanding better wages from private companies and state institutions – happening at the same time as people suddenly woke up to their lawful rights.

After an apparent reluctance, Abdullah embarked on a two-pronged policy to pre-empt a revolution in the country; on the one hand he set in motion a government-led national dialogue to discuss key changes to the flawed electoral system and the political parties' law, but on the other hand he strengthened the grip of security agencies in the country.

The King's approach has not only produced predictable contradictions—as reforms naturally require limiting the security agencies reach—but it has also led the country into a state of general confusion.

Crackdown

For while protests are generally allowed, the security forces used violence to break up the first attempt by the emerging youth movement to stage a sit-in on March 24th to demand immediate reforms and to prevent security agencies from interfering in the country's political life.

On the second day of the sit-in, the government staged a counter loyalist rally while security, together with “loyalists and thugs” proceeded to beat protesters with sticks and bats injuring scores of protesters and journalists alike.

Although the government was blamed, it was the King who was sending a message to Jordanians that he would not allow protests to evolve into a Tahrir square-like permanent sit-in for fear that it would transform into a movement demanding the fall of the regime.

The threatening tone of Prime Minister Marouf Al Bakheet, who placed the blame solely on the Muslim Brotherhood, was damaging to the country's national unit. Firstly, it perpetuated the prevailing divide between “loyalists” and “disloyal citizens. Secondly, it deepened the Palestinian-Jordanian divide as Jordanians of Palestinian origin are believed to be the main power base for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Jordanian-Palestinian dynamic

Palestinian-Jordanian tensions have been on the rise for years as Jordanians fear that they are becoming a minority in their own country while Palestinians, who constitute 40% - 60% of the country live in fear of losing their civic rights. As a result, the majority of the Palestinians have actually stayed away from the protests and the majority of those who staged the sit-in on March 24th were Jordanians. The two major uprisings in 1989 and 1996 erupted in the predominantly Jordanian south as people watched their limited government incomes shrinking in real value as a result of the liberalization of the economy.

One major demand, by a segment of the Jordanian opposition, is for the government to stop granting citizenship to Palestinians and to even revoke the citizenships of Palestinians who are from areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian authority.

Over the past few years, many citizenships were revoked, but the King who is seeking to heal rifts in the country, has ordered a review and even a reversal of the process of withdrawing citizenships.

The National Dialogue Committee

The National Dialogue Committee, entrusted with drawing a plan for reforms in the country, could not agree on a formula that could define the status of the Palestinians in Jordan. Instead it focused on suggesting changes that would ensure equality for all citizens—a formula that will prove contentious as some Jordanians view it as facilitating the increase of the number of Palestinians in Jordan.

The committee, however, was able to compromise proposals that got away with the old electoral system and that fostered tribal affiliations and replaced it with a modern one that

would enable political parties to form coalitions. This set the stage for the winning parties to form a parliamentary government.

But the committee's proposals have yet to win national consensus especially since the influential Muslim Brotherhood and other smaller leftist parties who boycotted the committee argue that they did not trust that the government was serious about reforms.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Empowered by the Arab revolutions and as Islamists expect to make a big win in Egyptian and Tunisian elections, the Muslim Brotherhood is not ready to simply negotiate with a government that they believe has no control over the process of change. The Muslim Brotherhood are not expected to settle for anything less than direct negotiations with King Abdullah, as they effectively demand to be recognized as the main, if not the only representative of the Jordanian public.

But there have been no serious signs that the Muslim Brotherhood is pushing for more political reforms rather than to replace the regime.

Obstacles

National consensus around reforming rather than toppling the regime has been sustained in spite of the prevailing disillusionment in the government's will to change.

Rampant corruption, which is believed to have cost the country billions of dollars of foreign aid and a suspicious privatization of government institutions, as well as the heavy influence of security agencies, have proved to be key impediments in the face of reform.

Corruption is very high and many blame (although they do not dare say that in public) the palace for allowing if not participating in it. This is why it will be difficult, if not impossible, to bring any of the big names accused of corruption to justice as any allegations are expected to be blocked from higher authorities.

Meanwhile security agencies have been acting with impunity. It is true that there are no comparisons between the situation in Jordan and repression in other Arab countries, but it is not possible to have real reforms when the security agencies continue to act independently from the government. Again and again, events have proved that the government had no control over or even any knowledge of what the security forces were up to.

Prospects for change

Change in Jordan hinges on Abdullah's will to embrace reforms and approve the annulment of amendments to the 1952 constitution that have practically undermined an independent judiciary and placed all powers in the hands of the palace and the government. Without such modification to the current constitution none of the proposals for reforms are meaningful since they can be circumvented by a string of extra-ordinary laws that undercut political freedoms, free and fair elections and an accountable government.

But most of all, the King must put an end to the excess of security agencies in order to restore eroding popular faith in the regime. After all, it was security intervention that was blamed for the rigging of the 2007 municipal and parliamentary elections and who were also accused of intervening in last year's parliamentary elections that produced a predominantly loyalist house of representatives.

While the post-Arab revolution atmosphere has given way to press freedoms in the country— as newspapers and electronic magazines are filled with reports critical of the government— increased attacks against journalists suggest that the security and conservative forces are trying to silence dissent. Suspicions were confirmed when the minister of information, Taher Adwan, a respected writer, resigned upon discovering that the government was pushing a new law to criminalize journalists and to stifle press freedoms. Although the government had to scrap the offensive articles in the law, the incident exposed the ongoing internal struggle between reformists and conservative forces who are afraid to lose their position of power.

But what may prove the biggest threat to reform in Jordan is the economic crisis in a country with limited resources and that is highly dependent on foreign financial aid. Both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia who are afraid that the crisis would trigger a revolution, have provided billions of dollars in aid to fund development projects. Saudi Arabia has provided \$400 million in a cash grant to respectively shore up the government's stripped budget. The King is also hoping that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), would admit Jordan into its ranks, or at least give it a favorable status, to open the Gulf markets for Jordanian goods and the country's skilled labour workers and professionals. But many fear that the association with the GCC would negatively affect reform efforts pitting economic needs against expansion of political freedoms.

Conclusion

Unlike in other Arab countries, where people are demanding the fall of regimes, people in Jordan are willing to give a chance for reforms under the Hashemite leadership. The ruthless clampdown on mass movements in Syria, Libya and in Yemen, have made Jordanians wary of a similar violent fate in Jordan. People in Jordan fear that the fall of the regime could lead to a civil strife between Jordanian and Palestinians and to clashes among the Jordanian tribes.

But the regime has been manipulating these fears, to prevent the unity of opposition trends and pre-empt a revolution. The regime will make a big mistake, as even insiders warn, if it does not proceed into a reforms process immediately.

An incident that took place in the southern town of Tafila on June 13th, underscored the Jordanian tribes growing alienation from the Hashemite regime. During a visit by the King to the town, the security clashed with residents who were seeking to air their grievances to the King. The episode left a bitter resentment especially since tribal leaders have been demanding that the government return land taken over by the state to supposedly build public projects. As one tribal leader said in private, "the up's are maybe slower in Jordan than in other countries. But the palace is testing our patience".

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