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The Arab Spring: The Case of Jordan

Hassan A. BARARI* & Christina A. SATKOWSKI**

Abstract

Unlike the Arab Spring that has swept much of the Arab World, the Jordanian Spring is limited in scope and end game. The movement has been largely nonviolent and protesters are calling for fixing the existing regime, rather than its overthrow. This paper examines the unique history of state-society dynamics that shaped the birth and progress of the Jordanian Spring. It describes how throughout its history as a modern state, the regime in Jordan has structured state-society relations to address a range of domestic and foreign policy challenges. Over the past two decades in particular, changes to electoral laws and persistent corruption have transformed the parliament into a weak and untrusted body. The Jordanian Spring protests, along with ongoing liberal economic reform programs, have challenged the patron-client system that has dominated Jordanian politics for decades. Finally, the authors evaluate the efforts by both state and society actors to arrive at a win-win solution. The Jordanian Spring has presented an opportunity to introduce the long-awaited package of reforms while sparing the country the insecurity found in other parts of the region. They conclude that the monarchy has already made notable moves towards reform, but much remains to be done if the Jordanian Spring is to end in peace and stability.

Keywords: Democratic Reform, Jordan, Islamists, Electoral Law, Demonstrations, Elections, Peace Process.

Arap Baharı: Ürdün'ün Durumu

Özet

Arap dünyasının çoğunu kasıp kavuran Arap Baharı'ndan farklı olarak, Ürdün Baharı, kapsam olarak ve sonuçları açısından sınırlıdır. Bu büyük ölçüde pasif (şiddete olaylarının yaşanmadığı) bir harekettir ve protestocular, rejimi devirmek yerine varolan rejimi düzeltmek için çağrıda bulunmaktadır. Bu yazı, Ürdün Baharı'nın ortaya çıkışını ve ilerleyişini şekillendiren devlet-toplum dinamiklerinin eşsiz tarihini incelemektedir. Modern bir devlet olarak, bir dizi iç ve dış politikaya ilişkin zorlukların üzerine eğilmek adına, tarihi boyunca Ürdün'deki rejimin, nasıl devlet-toplum ilişkilerini yapılandırdığına açıklık getirir.

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Özellikle son yirmi yıldır, seçim yasalarındaki değişiklikler ve devamlı yolsuzluklar, parlamentoyu zayıf ve güvenilmeyen bir organ haline getirmiştir. Devam eden liberal ekonomik reform programlarının beraberinde, Ürdün Baharı gösterileri de, yıllardır Ürdün siyasetinde egemen olan hamî-müvekkil sistemine karşı çıkmaktadır. Son olarak, yazarlar, kazan-kazan çözümüne varmak için hem devlet hem de toplum aktörlerinin çabalarını değerlendirmekteler. Ürdün Baharı, bölgenin diğer kesimlerinde görülen güvensizliğe söz konusu ülkede de yol açarken, uzun zamandır beklenen reform paketini uygulamaya geçirme fırsatı da sunmaktadır. Sonunda ise, monarşinin zaten reforma yönelik önemli bir hamle yaptığı, fakat eğer Ürdün Baharı barış ve istikrar ile son bulacaksa, daha yapılacak çok şey olduğu sonucuna varılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokratik Reform, Ürdün, İslamcılar, Seçim Yasası, Gösteriler, Seçimler, Barış Süreci.

الربيع العربي: حالة الأردن

حسن البراري وكريستينا ساتكوفسكي

ملخص

على عكس الربيع العربي الذي اجتاحت الكثير من دول المنطقة العربية، فالربيع الأردني هو محدود في مداه وفي نهاياته. فحركات الاحتجاج لم تكن عنيفة حيث كانت المطالب تنصب على فكرة اصلاح النظام وليس اسقاطه. وتتخصص هذه الورقة التاريخ الفريد لديناميكية علاقة الدولة بالمجتمع، وهي ديناميكية شكلت ولادة وتطور الربيع الأردني. والورقة بهذا المعنى تصف تاريخ العلاقة بين الدولة الحديثة والمجتمع التي مكنت النظام في الأردن من ترتيب العلاقة بشكل يساعدها على التصدي للتحديات الداخلية والخارجية. لكن وعلى مدار عقدين من الزمن، تم تغيير قانون الانتخابات ورافق ذلك فساد مستشري بحيث تحول البرلمان إلى هيكل ضعيف لا يحظى بمصداقية في الشارع. والاحتجاجات الشعبية بالإضافة إلى برامج الإصلاح الاقتصادية خلقت تحدياً للنظام الريعي الذي هيمن على السياسة الأردنية لعقود طويلة. لهذا، تحاول الورقة تقييم الجهود التي بذلت من قبل الدولة والمجتمع للتوصل إلى وضع مربح للطرفين. فالربيع الأردني وفر فرصة لتقديم حزمة الإصلاحات المنتظرة بشكل جنب البلد حالة من عدم الاستقرار هيمنت في مناطق أخرى من الإقليم. ويستنتج الباحثان بأن النظام في الأردن قام ببعض الخطوات من أجل الإصلاح مع أن هناك الكثير الذي يجب أن يقدم حتى ينتهي الربيع الأردني بسلام.

الكلمات الدالة: الإصلاح الديمقراطي، الأردن، الإسلاميون، قانون الانتخابات، المظاهرات، الانتخابات، عملية السلام.

Introduction

Throughout 2011, Jordan has been shaken by back-to-back demonstrations calling for reforming the regime. The people who have taken to the streets include tribal leaders, Islamists, and Leftists. This is a new development in Jordan as it is the first time people from all walks of life have stood together to call for genuine reform. Yet, unlike the Arab Spring that has swept much of the Arab world (Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and most recently, Syria), the Jordanian Spring has been limited in scope and end game. So far, no key political force in Jordan has called for a regime change. However, the consensus is that the political status quo in Jordan is untenable and therefore, Jordanians have taken to the street call for fixing rather than changing the regime.

The monarch in Jordan does not feel threatened by the Arab Spring because the calls for reform in the kingdom have not turned violent. Not a single demonstrator in Jordan has been killed since the onset of the Jordanian Spring. This paper analyzes the unique history of state-society dynamics that shaped the birth and progress of the “Jordanian Spring.” It will further evaluate the attempts exerted so far by state and societal actors to achieve a win-win situation, rather than the zero-sum result that characterized the Arab Spring in other parts of the region.

A Historical Background

It has been an axiom for observers to posit that Jordan’s geo-strategic location has been a liability as much as an asset. Jordan sits at the center of a volatile regional environment, and over the years it has had to face the grave consequences of unending regional instability and influx of Palestinian refugees into the kingdom. These challenges remain the hallmark of Jordanian political life. To survive, the monarch has had to chart a balanced domestic and foreign policy. Over decades, the regime has shrewdly exploited Jordan’s geo-strategic location to secure an influx of foreign aid that helped the regime to create a kind of semi-

rentier system.¹ For years this has helped Jordan to make up for the lack of strong indigenous economy. It has also shaped state-society relations in a way that allowed the monarch to overcome economic as well as political challenges by emasculating “institutionalized opposition to its rule and relying on the distribution of benefits and privileges to create a cohesive support base and a security establishment loyal to the existing political order.”² In other words, the nature of the Jordanian economy and the sources of state revenue helped create a network of patron-client relationships that made it easy to put political reform on the back burner.

When Jordanians took to the streets of several cities in the spring of 1989 to protest the government’s decision to raise prices of several commodities, the late King Hussein responded to the mini-uprising by opening up the political system, ultimately allowing the fairest parliamentary elections in the modern history of Jordan to take place. The milestone elections of November 1989 were hailed by the opposition and international observers alike. The King gained unprecedented popularity in the few years that followed, especially due to his pro-Iraq stand during the First Gulf War. Yet, those elections would be an isolated episode in Jordan’s perennial quest for democracy. Despite the optimism surrounding the elections of 1989, Jordan has failed to develop a democratic system based on rotation of power through ballot box.

The state-society harmony during this period could not have been more striking. All internal political indicators suggested that Jordan was on the right track. The political reform process continued and it brought about some positive progress. Above all, the King reached a historical reconciliation with those who once sought to bring him down. The National Charter of 1991 outlined a new framework for political participation in the kingdom, giving the King a legitimacy that he had never enjoyed in Jordan before. The King suspended the martial law that had been imposed in 1957, thus permitting the opposition to take part in

1 Hazem Beblawi has developed the term “rentier state” to describe those states which derive all or a substantial portion of their national revenues from the rent of indigenous resources to external clients. For a details see Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World” in Giacomo Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 85-98.

2 Julia Choucair, “Illusive Reform: Jordan’s Stubborn Stability,” *Carnegie Papers*, No. 76, December 2006.

the political life. For the first time in decades, Islamists agreed to participate in the government. As noted above, the King's decision not to support the American-led coalition to eject the Iraqi forces from Kuwait boosted his pan-Arabist credentials. For many Jordanians, that was a defining moment in their satisfaction with the King's leadership both domestically and internationally.

This decision was not without a huge price. Indeed, it drew the wrath of two important constituencies: the Americans and the Gulf countries. Their ire was felt soon after the cessation of the Gulf War. Economic aid into the country ceased and worker remittances dried up as hundreds of thousands of Jordanians were kicked out of the Gulf and thus forced to return, jobless, to the kingdom. The economy plummeted and Jordan felt more isolated and vulnerable than ever both regionally and internationally.

And yet, Jordan had to survive. The number one priority for the King at this time was to break out from the disheartening cycle of regional and international isolation. He found in the 1991 Madrid peace conference and the peace process his key to survival. He entered into the process forcefully despite some domestic opposition. When it looked that as if Jordan was about to reach an agreement with Israel, the King reorchestrated the domestic political scene to get the support he needed were he to reach a peace with Israel. In 1993, the government changed the Electoral Law and restructured electoral districts to deprive the opposition of a strong voting block that could limit the King's room of maneuver in dealing with Israel. The King then dissolved the parliament and called for early elections. Thus, the government of Jordan turned its back on reform and resorted to a new electoral law to guarantee a parliament that would ratify whatever deal the King would strike with Israel. Reform was put on a back burner and as of that moment power was centralized in the hand of a few.³ Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to claim first victim of the peace process was the domestic political reform and democracy.

3 Malik Mufti, "Elite Bargains and the Onset of Political Liberalization in Jordan", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 32, No.1, (February, 1999) pp. 100-129. See also Laurie Brand, "The Effects of the Peace Process in Political Liberalization in Jordan", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1999.

Today, after almost more than two decades since the resumption of the democratic political life in Jordan, the parliament has become dysfunctional and state-society relations are seriously strained. A quick look at the high percentage of governments getting the vote of confidence is nothing but alarming. For example, the government of Prime Minister Samir Rifai (December 2009 – February 2011) conducted and supervised an election which many believed was rigged. When 93% of the Jordanian parliament granted him a vote of confidence, observers described this as akin to the legislature shooting itself in the foot.⁴ The vote precipitated deterioration in the status of the parliament in the eyes of people. Jordanians did not understand this overwhelming vote of confidence for a government that was distrusted by the street. Indeed, this high level of confidence is a clear indicator of the trust gap between public opinion on the one hand and the parliament and the government in the other hand. Observers of Jordanian politics frequently point out to the irony that whenever the higher the government got a high level of vote of confidence the least popular the government in the street.

In the past decade, the parliament, the institution that embodies state-society relations in Jordan, has grown increasingly irrelevant. The voting record during these years indicates that the parliament lost its ability to monitor the government. The last two elections in particular (2007 and 2010) produced parliaments that were seen as a rubber stamp for the government. Moreover, its popularity has taken a nosedive since its high in the early 1990s. Harsh critiques of the parliaments, seen both in newspapers and heard on the streets, have become more frequent. Poll after poll, even those conducted by the government's own research center, show declining trust in the parliament.⁵ When the King dissolved the parliament in 2009, a majority of Jordanians supported his decision.

The current parliament is seen as the most conforming to the government. Like all of the legislatures elected since the revised Electoral Law

⁴ Jordanian press was full of articles criticizing the conduct by the parliament. See for instance articles written by Hassan Barari, Mohammed Abu Rumman, Fahad Khitan.

⁵ For more details, see the series of polls conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies (Amman) in 2009.

was implemented in 1993, the current parliament is very weak. The Electoral Law included a provision of “one person, one vote” which, given the arrangement of Jordan’s voting districts, has favored the rural areas and tribal groups over the kingdom’s urban population. In particular, the new voting arrangement weakened the power of the Islamists. In the most recent elections, the Islamists decided to boycott the elections, further undermining the legitimacy of the parliament. It is thus clear that the governmental policies since 1993 have transformed the parliament into a body that operates as a satellite to the government -- rather than a part of it -- with members who seek personal favors to their constituencies or to their relatives.

Upon his accession to the throne, King Abdullah promoted an image of himself as a reformer. He came up with a number of initiatives such as Jordan First, the National Agenda, and a sweeping vision of socio-economic transformation, but progress has been modest. In fact, the first decade of the twenty first century was the worst for reform. For no reason, the parliament was suspended for more than two years between 2001 and 2003. Implicit in that action was a condescending attitude on the part of the ruling elite of the ability of people to elect their true representatives who were up to the vision of the King. There was a naïve assumption on the part of some influential politicians that Jordan needed a quick pace of reform and the parliament was only impeding this process. They argued for reform from above, or to use the parlance of political scientist, Jordan needed a “top-down” approach to affect the desired reforms. However, as Julia Choucair describes, “it has been a halfhearted and hesitant top-down reform effort.”⁶

It was at this juncture that power was centralized in the hands of a few politicians -many of whom were accused of being corrupt -who initiated privatization in a very irresponsible way. Without effective monitoring bodies, corruption reached a point unprecedented in the history of Jordan. And at one point, it seems as if the state was incapable of reversing this deteriorating trend. Against this backdrop, people had

⁶ Julia Choucair, “Illusive Reform: Jordan’s Stubborn Stability,” *Carnegie Papers*, No. 76, December, 2006, p.3.

no choice but to resort to the street to express their dissatisfaction and bitterness about the economic and political situations.

The Jordanian Spring

In his gripping analysis of the dynamic of reforms in Jordan, Marwan Muasher, a researcher at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, laid the blame for the failure of reform at the ruling elite's door:

In a country where the king has broad powers over all branches of government, his expressed frustration over the struggling reform efforts begs the question of why the status quo remains intact. This decade-long process, initiated by the king, has been largely ignored by an ossified layer of elites seeking to protect their own interests. The clear discrepancy between the king's directives to the seven prime ministers he had entrusted to form governments in his twelve years of power—and the actual record of reform completed by these respective governments—points to a structural problem that is all too often ignored.⁷

While the analysis is correct in claiming that the ruling elite were behind the stubborn pace of reform, it is a bit reductionist as it only refers to the traditional figures who have played a prominent role in Jordanian politics over the last decade. Indeed, the liberals were equally if not more responsible for the failure of reform. This group also preferred a more autocratic government because they thought it would be a quicker way of achieving their desired liberal economic reforms, particularly privatization. In 2008, the Jordanian press began to focus intently on the role of liberal politicians in mismanaging the economy, particularly the Chief of the Royal Court, Bassem Awadallah. The campaign against him was so serious that Awadallah had to step down, but only after his policies eroded much of the people's trust in the state.

When compared to the massive and often violent Arab Spring protests that have brought down governments in other parts of the region, the demonstrations in Jordan appear rather calm. But this impression can be misleading. Indeed, Jordanians began taking to the street long

⁷ Marwan Muasher, "Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System," *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, May 2011.

before the first protests in Tunisia heralded the beginning of the Arab Spring. And unlike protests in other countries which erupted haphazardly, protests in Jordan were organized and planned by political forces in a way that contrasts greatly from the seemingly spontaneous protests that emerged in other Arab cities. First, the voices of dissent included many respected former government officials. On May 1, 2011, a group of retired army officers issued a statement that struck a nerve in Jordanian political circles. This influential and respected group of patriot retired army officers pointed out to the King's wife as playing a "negative" role thus weakening Jordan. Journalist Robert Fisk described them as "expressing their fears that Israeli plans for the West Bank and 'a fifth column of collaborators' within Jordan who support US policy in the region – their identity is left dangerously unspecified – may destroy their country." General Ali Habashneh, a leading figure among the retired army officer, is quoted saying: "There is corruption, a widening of the gap between rich and poor... Economic investment policies are destroying the country. This is what our national movement is all about. We are trying to get all our forces together to hold a national conference by the beginning of the New Year, to decide on a strategic movement which will protect this country and remove the influence of the Israelis and Americans."⁸

This should have set off an alarm bell in the Jordanian government, but it seemed that there was no one in power to hear it. No effort was made to engage with the generals, who were in many circles were seen as more credible than the government, and dampen the prospects of this movement developing into a popular protests movement. Instead, the government accused them of looking out for their own interest.

Second, organized nation-wide protests have occurred many times in Jordan's recent history. Almost five months before the eruption of the Tunisian revolution, teachers initiated protests in Jordan. In their bid to get the government agree to their demand of establishing a union for teachers, they had to take to the street hoping to make their voice heard. Throughout 2010, teachers, particularly those in the poorest provinces of Jordan's South, instigated a number of sit-ins in down-

⁸ Quoted in Robert Fisk, "Why Jordan is occupied by Palestinians," *The Independent*, 22 July 2010.

town Amman and some cities in the south. The teachers' proactive events were indicators of the deteriorating relationship between the state and the social forces and between the governments and the popular forces. That said, the social protest movement in Jordan did not develop into a popular uprising or a revolution as the case in Tunis, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and finally in Syria.

Third, while demonstrations have been growing in size and frequency, they have not been violent. There are several reasons for this. The primary reason for the peaceful character of the protests is that the state has been prudent in not using excessive force against the demonstrators. At the same time, the protestors maintain a hope that they can work with the King to achieve change. They believe that violence would only hurt their negotiating position and thus end any chance for significant reform.

Against this backdrop, the sudden downfall of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was a game changer in Jordan for both the protestors and the government. All the sudden, the "invincibility" mentality on the part of the regime in Jordan collapsed. Under the pressure of the street, the King sacked his cabinet in February 2011 and devised a strategy to contend with the new challenges. The number one priority was to contain the street by introducing quick reforms. In a statement, the King said the new prime minister's mission was "to take practical, quick and tangible steps to launch true political reforms, enhance Jordan's democratic drive and ensure safe and decent living for all Jordanians."⁹

At one point, it seems that both the King and his government were racing against the clock to affect the minimum reform to placate the street and preempt the possibility that events might turn ugly. In March 2011 the King established National Dialogue Committee, a 52-member body comprised of leaders from Jordan's political and societal groups, and charged it with drafting an electoral law and law for political parties. More importantly, he set up a royal committee to revise the constitution

9 "Jordan protests: King Abdullah names Marouf", *BBC News*, 1 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12336960>

and suggest the required amendments to bring about the desired political reform. The two committees were quick in fulfilling their mandate. Domestic and foreign observers praised the King for managing to deal peacefully with the series of sit-ins, rallies, and demonstrations while simultaneously introducing meaningful reforms.¹⁰

Yet while Jordanians cautiously welcomed the recommendations of the two committees as a positive step forward, the government of Marouf Bakhit was becoming a growing burden in the government's quest to win and retain the trust of the people. In his private talks, the Prime Minister criticized the recommendations of the committee, and did not try to conceal that he was not obliged by their recommendations. Since the beginning of his term as prime minister, Mr. Bakhit had been viewed status quo personality with no interest in reform. Just a few months before becoming a Prime Minister, he emphasized the reform would take thirty years to materialize. Moreover, a common view emerged that Mr. Bakhit, in his second term as prime minister, did not learn the lessons from the mistakes of his first term. In his previous term, Bakhit had presided over a government that rigged elections in 2007 twice: the municipal elections and later the Parliamentary ones. Mr. Bakhit also figured at the center of a corruption scandal involving a secret plan to build a casino at the Dead Sea. When it became clear that he failed again in his second term as a prime minister, the King had to sack him and appoint another government.

Assessment of the State Response

Throughout the Jordanian Spring, the state has been slow to respond. It seems that Jordan did not have senior politicians who fit the bill of leadership thus aggravating the already existing trust gap between the state and society. Even given Jordan's tension-filled history of state-society relations, the size of this gap is significant. The increasing frequency of public demonstrations is a clear indication that people no longer trust the institutions of the state.

The success of the regime's attempts to respond to the current challenges must be viewed in the context of the regime's previous at-

¹⁰ All official statements from the western capital praised the King's steps.

tempts to reform. When King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 1999, economics had supplanted regional politics as Jordan's number one priority. In light of his vision of a modern Jordan, the King initiated liberal economic reforms including subsidy reductions and privatization. The King was trying to affect change that could streamline the government and make the public sector more efficient. Yet, his vision of a modern Jordan and the subsequent economic reform program were overshadowed by reports of eye-catching corruption. Jordanian press, especially the new media, buzzed with corruption scandals. Chief among them were the above-mentioned government effort to license a foreign casino in Jordan, private sales of government lands engineered by nothing but the Royal Court, and the decision to allow Khaled Shahin -- a tycoon jailed on corruption charges -- to go abroad for medical treatment and only return after popular pressures forced the government's hand.

Undoubtedly, the official policies did not resonate well with the people, particularly the Transjordanians who historically have constituted the social backbone of the regime. The policies adopted by the state have alienated many of them to the extent that they felt that the regime intended to further marginalize them. Transjordanians who had traditionally been the regime's leading supporters were hit hardest by the new economic policies. And the personalities most identified with the success of these policies were ironically Jordanians of Palestinian origin, which has only exacerbated Transjordanian concerns. Not surprisingly, Transjordanians now constitute the core of the kingdom's protest movement. Indeed, according to recent polls, this constituency feels more alienated than ever from the government's decision-making process.

To the vexation of the regime and security apparatuses, resentment has also been growing among Jordanians of Palestinian origin in recent years, thanks in large part to the dominant impression of pervasive corruption. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) is seen as representing much of Palestinians' political grievances in Jordan. Today, a high percentage of Jordanians say fighting corruption as their top priority and that

fixing the regime is a prerequisite for clean governance.¹¹ Furthermore, polls conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan demonstrate that Jordanians from different walks of life say the government needs to put a cap on unemployment and poverty.¹²

This pessimistic consensus is notable, as it indicates that the traditional clientalist relationships are breaking down. Jordanians' demands are increasingly economic, not political, and they see that corruption has reached a point where it is impeding the functioning of the state. The regime can no longer expect to secure support through targeted policies that favor specific groups, both because the clientalist system is more exposed than ever to public scrutiny and because it cannot respond to Jordanians' basic demands for jobs and efficient public services.

The monarch is aware of the economic hardship that befalls his people. On more than one occasion, the King made clear that his goal is to improve the living situations of his people. To a great extent, he designed his foreign policy to bring more economic aid to his country in his bid to offset the budget deficit that hit a new mark in 2011 when it reached some \$2 billion. Jordanian law does not allow public debt to exceed 60 percent of GDP, and the fact that the country's obligations have now hit this threshold has become a severe constraint on the government's ability to finance new social assistance programs. For this reason, the King has worked meticulously domestically and internationally to attract foreign investment to Jordan.

So far, the monarch's response to the Jordanian Spring has been limited. The government has continued the old strategy of unveiling incremental reforms to placate protesters while at the same time pursuing a new strategy of slowly pushing the state towards a more meaningful, systematic reform. The regime understands that it is not enough to just change cabinets without following this with actual policies that people can feel. When the King sacked his second prime minister in October 2011 and appointed Awn Khasawneh -- a man who is not seen as cor-

11 For more details, see polls of the CSS.

12 Ibid

rupted or part of traditional political cliques -- he hoped that this could calm his critics and send a clear message that he meant business.

While Jordan gives the impression that it is gearing up for reform and addressing the public outcry over corrupted policies, the new government may run into the same bureaucratic and economic impediments that have stymied previous cabinets. For many, it seems that prime ministers are there to sack! Evidently, the King's decision to appoint a third government in one year fits neatly in his strategy to calm down increasingly restive people's demands for reform. In tandem with the cabinet change in Jordan, the King had to change the head of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) as the agency came under fire for its perceived role in impeding reform. In a letter to the new director, the King said, "Your leadership at the GID comes as part of our efforts to translate our comprehensive reform vision. This requires that you direct this glorious institution towards supporting the reform process, by employing new tools and approaches...in full respect of the institutional and legal frameworks, human rights and freedoms."¹³

Though the King seems to grasp that his core value – legitimacy – now rests on his ability to be seen as responding to the longstanding demands from the people, the status quo elite have been trying to stifle reforms. Some pro-regime forces assert that the problem is not with the King himself, as others claim. Yet the issue is much more complicated and has much to do with the elite. As Marwan Muasher argues:

These elites have become recalcitrant, self-appointed guardians of the state who believe they alone should decide how the country ought to evolve. They have no qualms about opposing the directives of the leaders or systems that created them in the first place if those leaders are seen as adopting policies that threaten their interests.¹⁴

And yet, the King should be in a position to prevail given the huge support of the street for reforms. But he cannot rely on the current state of

¹³ *Al-Rai Daily*, 11 November 2001.

¹⁴ Marwan Muasher, "Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System," *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, May 2011.

affairs without losing more control over events. It is true that the reform package he initiated is on the right track but it has achieved far less than required. Notably, Islamists in Jordan -- widely seen as the most organized and most powerful political force-- are not satisfied with the package of reforms. The monarch is aware of the deteriorating trust gap between the state and society. Key to his demonstrating a serious attitude towards reform is to enhance the power of the government, including the parliament. For him to secure a strong government that can stand up to the historic mission of affecting genuine reform, he needs to be aware of the lack of balance and harmony between the different centers of power. Under his leadership, the balance has been skewed even more in favor of the Royal Court and GID, two bodies that answer directly to him. This imbalance indeed has weakened the state and has all preceding government powerless.

The next challenge for the regime will be to build a political system that includes the new identities that are emerging -- or re-emerging -- among the Jordanian public. The low trust in Jordanian political institutions at the national level has led to another phenomenon: the retreat of Jordanians to their sub-identities, such as tribes. While these sub-identities have existed for decades, they no longer fit neatly into the old clientalist system. The emergence of sub-identities challenges the very notion of the Jordanian citizen at a time when the government is trying to achieve national unity and re-establish public faith in state institutions.

Conclusion

The dynamics Jordanian Spring could not be more striking. People have not missed a single Friday without taking to the street and call for genuine reform, the state response has been benign. And while some demonstrations have led to tense clashes between protesters and police, there have been no casualties, and this should be seen as positive. With the new government and the King's assertion that he is in reform mode, people are cautiously optimistic that reform can be achieved. However, this is easier said than done. The status quo forces are not expected to give up easily and without the King throwing his weight behind the pro-reform forces, chances for genuine reform will be dim.

If anything, activists and the emerging pro-reform lobby want to see an electoral law that can produce a strong parliament and restore the balance of power between the three authorities. In an op-ed, the leading IAF official Irhail al-Gharaibah suggested that “a new electoral law with the purpose of ensuring public participation in governance may be the only way out of the current crisis.”¹⁵ For a majority of observers, enacting a new modern electoral law is the cornerstone of reform.

The battle over reform is far from being decided. The state has lost the patronage power it once enjoyed. With the retreat of the government from the economic sphere and the emergence of a privatized economy, and the consequent weakening of patron-client relations, people will not rest without feeling empowered. Therefore, the monopoly of power is not set in stone. This is a challenge for the King, who will have little choice but to push for reform before it is too late. The reform package did not go far enough to placate the street and the monarch understands this very well. Now it remains to be seen how far the monarch will be dealing with the mounting demands of Jordanians. The age-old tactic of cutting deals at the expense of reform has outlived its usefulness.

¹⁵ *Al Arab al-Yawm Daily*, 20 October 2011.

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