

PATRONAGE AND CLIENTELISM IN JORDAN: THE MONARCHY AND THE TRIBES IN THE WAKE OF THE "ARAB SPRING"¹

ARTICLE

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In the context of the popular uprisings in the MENA countries, commonly known as the "Arab Spring", Jordan has in many respects been neglected by both the international political arena and scholarly analysis. The Hashemite Kingdom, characterised by its political stability and "neutral" positioning in many of the confrontations that have shaped regional politics, has implemented some reforms in an effort to avoid the more profound political changes that its neighbours have experienced and that could have had a direct impact on the regime.

Against this backdrop, this paper analyses the patron-client dynamics that structure Jordanian politics and links them to the resilience shown by the authoritarian system. The analysis emphasises the central role played by tribal organisation within the Jordanian monarchy, considers tribes to be an intermediate structure that functions as patronage brokers and describes how this social structure is self-reinforcing, a quality that helps to maintain the political status quo.

After the last neoliberal economic reforms implemented from the second half of the 1980s, much privatisation has taken place and the tribes have lost a great deal of their income. This privatisation has weakened both the clientelistic distributive capacity of the authoritarian regime and the tribes in their role as subpatrons, directly affecting the established network of dependency. Thus, in 2010 and for the first time in Jordanian history, traditional loyalty started to be seriously reviewed and questioned.

To fully understand how this political strategy of clientelistic distribution works, it is necessary to outline some of the main characteristics of the Jordanian economy. Jordan is a semi-rentier state with neither oil nor water resources (Brynen, 1992: 72; Barari & Satkowski, 2012: 44). Its main economic resource is its population, seen as a human resource, thanks to the high level of education. Its rentier nature and external dependence means that the state plays a distributing rather than a collecting role, which in turn reduces the population's bargaining power and gives greater power to the traditional elites.

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¹ For a more extensive and complete analysis, please refer to: Melián, L. (2018). Patronage and Clientelism in Jordan: The Monarchy and the Tribes in the Wake of the "Arab Spring". In L. Ruiz de Elvira, C. Schwarz and I. Weiper-Fenner (Eds.). *Networks of Dependency: Clientelism and Patronage in the Middle East and North Africa*. London: Routledge.

The State Formation: the King as a “Primus Inter Pares”

In 1921, after the Great Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire (1916), the United Kingdom created the Emirate of Transjordan under colonial rule. It was a territory without resources, “geographically absurd” and without a national tradition (Yom, 2013: 127). Society was mostly Bedouin, with a tribal social structure that lacked any notion of loyalty or commitment towards any government or state (Alon, 2009: 17).

After a lengthy negotiation process, and thanks to the legitimacy obtained in his previous role in the Great Revolt and to his capacity as a descendant of the Prophet’s family, he managed to establish himself as an authority in the region in the eyes of the British. Before, he was approved by the sheikhs of the great tribes established in the area in a “king of kings” (*shaykh ash-shuyukh*) fashion, where the king is a *primus inter pares* and thus depends on the support of the other leaders (Buttorff, 2015: 53). This may be identified as the first step towards the establishment of a clientelistic relation, asymmetric while mutually dependent, between tribes and monarchy and is a very relevant critical juncture that helps us understand further political developments.

This model was based on the distribution of wealth through subsidies and the well-known *wasta*² in order to secure any established alliances. The tribal structure served here as a founding element, representing the so-called deepest core of Jordanian identity: the Bedouin ethos of the past as the idealisation of a moral code from a superior, less corrupt society. According to Layne (1989: 24), “the Bedouin tribes have managed to become the symbol of Jordan’s national identity as opposed to the traditional Palestinian sedentary society.”

The “Authoritarian Pact”

In order to understand what Jordan has gone through since its foundation, a useful notion must be introduced to our analysis: “the authoritarian pact”. Authoritarian pacts have been defined as “social contracts” based on a certain deference from the population towards the political authorities with a high degree of submissiveness and greater autonomy in the authoritarian elite, in exchange for the latter providing a certain economic security (Brynen, 1992: 75)

In the Jordanian context, more precisely, three main elements define the authoritarian pact: the monarchy as the guardian of stability and economic security, society as a passive political actor in the role of recipient of the state clientelistic system and the tribes as the necessary intermediate element.

However, when economic problems arise the pact may weaken. During the 1980s, in the context of a major financial downturn resulting from the oil crisis, a period of economic liberalisation started, defined by the conditions imposed by the IMF in exchange for economic help. These liberal policies contributed to the 1989 and 2011 revolts. Acutely aware of the possible social and political consequences of the erosion and eventual end of the authoritarian pact, the Jordanian regime responded to the outbreaks of social unrest in 1989 and again in

² This is a well-known and widespread concept in the Arab World that refers to nepotism or having connections.

2011 by implementing survival strategies based on controlled political liberalisation processes and the opening of new spaces within the political arena. While Glenn Robinson (1998) has described this as a “defensive democratisation”, I would contend that “defensive liberalisation” is a more apt phrase, as no real democratisation process has ever taken place.

In addition, the pact has been reinforced, since its very beginning, with emotional and identity-based ties, on the one hand, as shown in the Jordan nationalist strategy, where the monarchy presents itself as symbolising the existence of the Jordanian ethos; and, on the other, and more recently, a discourse of fear evoking the threat of chaos that has engulfed its neighbours has been established, wherein the potential outcomes of the protests were framed between two poles, the chaos that change could potentially bring versus the stability of the status quo.

Tribes within the Political Structure: Brokers and Clients

The Jordanian case is an interesting one that shows how the tribal structure operates as an intermediate framework between the political elite (the monarchy in this case) and the population. Therefore, tribes can be understood and regarded both as elite – insofar as their leaders are an important part of the political establishment – and as belonging to the population representing Jordanian society as a whole (except for the Palestinians). As this intermediate position demands, the tribes must be analysed both in their role as clients and as political brokers who also compete for the same economic and political resources.

The Transjordanian tribal structure comprises the main recruitment pool for the most conservative and traditional political elite. Tribes act as an intermediate body that transmits and puts into practice the decisions made by the state's upper echelons, and they guarantee law enforcement and social order. However, their role is not just a passive one, as they have agency and know how to use it to their advantage and gain something in exchange. In order to ensure this, the monarchy makes use of the public sector as an economic and power resource, given to tribe leaders to be distributed among their members in exchange for allegiance. Consequently, Jordanian demands on political accountability are drastically reduced due to the circular dynamics of power typically found in rentier states, and because of the imposed obstacles to the establishment of a broad-based civil society by the tribal political system.

Another traditional source of support for the monarchy and a clientelistic redistributive resource for the government are the country's military forces, which are closely linked to the elites and to the tribal structure they belong to. This state institution constitutes, alongside the public sector, the most important client and distributive resource for the regime.

Conclusion: Tribal System and Change after the “Arab Spring”

The 2011 demonstrations in Jordan succeeded in bringing some important topics onto the political agenda and these were addressed by the National Dialogue Committee appointed by the king in March 2011 (Barari & Satkowski, 2012: 50). The changes and reform packages created by these bodies and presented by the king followed the “reformist” maxim of Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, where everything must change so that everything can stay the same, and indeed this maxim has governed all changes in Jordan since the state was created (Barari, 2013: 12).

The “Arab Spring” protests in Jordan showed that the diminishing of the regime's distributive capacity had seriously shaken and eroded the entrenched foundations of support. They made explicit the profound cracks in these pillars and in the relationship between monarchy and tribal leaders. In this sense, it should also be noted that these tribal leaders had yet to be identified by the population, their clients, as responsible for the impoverishment. So their role as patrons remained stable and secure, while they, in turn, became more demanding clients of the monarchy in response to the pressure felt from plain tribal members. It is yet to be seen if there will also be a re-configuration of the relationship between tribal leaders and their clients, and if society will start demanding more accountability from tribal leaders too.

These patronage dynamics have also benefited from the rentier nature of the state, even though the deepening of the economic crisis and the ensuing loss of the regime's distributive capacities in the wake of the IMF privatisation policies have seriously damaged those alliances. This seems, at first glance, to reinforce the hypothesis that an economic crisis within rentier economies affects and erodes the authoritarian pacts. But, on the other hand, as the Jordanian analysis shows, the authoritarian pact can be safeguarded if fitted with identity-based and nationalistic armour. In the Jordanian case this has been achieved by identifying the royal family with the state (Ryan, 2012: 165) and the tribal system itself.

As a final conclusion after this analysis of what has taken place in Jordan in the last few years, it can be said that the “defensive liberalisation” strategy carried out by the authoritarian regime seems to have worked so far in a sort of choice for coexistence between the tribes and the monarchy. Tribes as clients need the distributive patronage to survive but the authoritarian rulers cannot survive without the tribes' support. In this context, the continuous loss of resources in the hands of the regime to distribute is endangering this allegiance and the first signs of weakening are there for all to see. How long this strategy can keep on working is something only time can tell.

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