

Jordan: Constant, but Fragile, Stability

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For another year, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has followed the political dynamics of recent decades, whereby the country operates in a seemingly fragile equilibrium between the stability and continuity of the monarchy and increasingly recurring demonstrations and popular protests. Thus far, all of this has taken place within a context of calls for the system's reform (*islah*) rather than its fall, as demanded in the famous slogan of Arab revolutions past, "The people want the fall (*isqat*) of the regime." Whilst 2018 was not an important year for elections in this small Middle Eastern country, it did witness numerous popular mobilizations that led to the fall of the government and the withdrawal of sweeping economic laws.

Tribal Patronage and Politics in Jordan: Tribes as the Core?

It is impossible to understand Jordan's historical and political development without acknowledging the central role that tribal organization has played, and continues to play, in the country. The tribes sustain the monarchy within the framework of the regime's founding "authoritarian pact," which establishes the King as a *shaikh ash-shuyukh*, a sort of "king of kings" amongst the tribal leaders. In turn, the tribes have been configured as an intermediate structure in the logic of tribal clientelism, ensuring the social order in exchange for the distribution of state assets and resources (Melián, 2018). However, in recent years, and especially in 2018, two related phenomena have

been observed within the context of this "authoritarian pact."

First, since the 2011 demonstrations in the country, the tribes – as a result of the regime's eroded clientelist distribution capacity due to the economic adjustment reforms promoted by the IMF – have begun, in a more or less veiled manner, to directly criticize the monarchy, exposing the existence of cracks in the authoritarian pact. Second, the popular protests of the second half of 2018 point to a significant generational change, whereby social mobilization is no longer organized around tribal identity, but rather the new identity shared by Jordanian youth, which goes beyond membership in a given clan. The precariousness, unemployment, corruption and political disaffection shared by a large part of young Jordanians have managed to unite and channel a malaise that transcends tribal boundaries. This still incipient change in the core of the socio-political structure seems to be displacing the once indisputable predominance of tribal identity in favour of new identities of belonging, in which the "authoritarian tribal pact" is regarded as obsolete by most young people. It could thus be conducive to the emergence of a party system based on new demands and identities, in opposition to the weak Jordanian party system, in which tribal representation has been the key component to date.

Political Disaffection and Decentralization

No important elections were held in Jordan in 2018 (other than repeat elections in two electoral districts for 2017 municipal elections following their annulment). Jordanian electoral processes have traditionally been characterized by legislative instability with regard to electoral regulations, which has hindered the formation of a learning process for the people to

learn how the system works. Accordingly, the 2016 parliamentary elections were held under a new electoral system designed to meet some of the social demands of the 2011 uprisings. However, political disaffection has been present in the country for years, and the political and electoral reforms to come out of the protests failed to increase interest in voting, resulting in a turnout of just 36%.

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The following year, in August 2017, the so-called "decentralization" elections were held. These were local and municipal elections in which, for the first time, government representatives were elected directly, in keeping with the decentralization policy established by law in 2014. These elections entailed significant new developments, as, even though according to the data published by the Jordanian newspaper *al-Ghad*, tribal candidates captured 85% of the vote, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood stopped boycotting elections and stood candidates, netting the mayoralty of three Jordanian cities, including Zarqa, the country's second most populous city. However, none of these changes has managed to increase Jordanians' interest in elections, and turnout, in line with the 2016 parliamentary elections, remained very low, at barely 32% of the electorate.

The Muslim Brotherhood's role in Jordan, and, more specifically, that of its political arm the Islamic Action Front, is very important, as it reflects the support that they have achieved in the various elections. Furthermore, in addition to the traditional link with the population of Palestinian origin, much of Jordanian youth has found in the Muslim Brotherhood's discourse the lost appeal of tribal identity. In this regard, part of the Islamist strategy has been to show a moderate discourse, focusing on domestic issues (el-Said and Rauch, 2015).

The Economy and Protests: Low Intensity, Long Duration

Jordan's current development and economic situation are key to understanding the political and especially anti-establishment evolution that the country has undergone since the infamous "bread riots" of the late 1980s.

Jordan is a country without any major natural resources to exploit – beyond tourism and human resources – where water and energy sources are worryingly scarce. As a result, the country is set up as a semi-rentier state (Brynen, 1992) that depends on external income from international aid for its domestic economic development. This is conducive to the creation of circular power dynamics, in which the State distributes the external resources obtained in a clientelist way amongst the tribes in exchange for a certain degree of security and political autonomy. Such dynamics decrease accountability to the State and, thus, weaken the emergence of democratic demands.

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In 2018, the country failed to overcome the economic problems that have hampered it virtually since it was founded, with an especially troubling increase in recent years of the public debt, which now stands at nearly 100% of GDP. This is compounded by a highly educated, young population without real access to a job market that is unable to absorb them. According to official data, unemployment in the country is 18.4%, although the figure is two times as high amongst the youth population, making it the highest it has been in the last 25 years. Furthermore, the policies imposed by the IMF, in exchange for liquidity to reduce the country's debt, have had various conse-

quences, such as a reduction in the State's capacity for clientelist distribution or a decrease in subsidies for staple goods, such as flour, bread or fuel. Similarly, the situation of insecurity in the region and neighbouring countries has negatively impacted the tourism sector, the main economic engine. Nevertheless, the World Bank estimates that GDP growth in the country will be 2% for 2018.

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This economic situation is a breeding ground for hopelessness and despair, especially amongst the younger population segments (Ryan 2013). Thus, Jordan currently has an especially young and well-prepared population pyramid that lacks access to the job market and is riven by a growing generational divide that has steadily diluted the once all-powerful tribal identity.

This socioeconomic context helps shed light on the increase in political protests that have taken place in the country and that led to the general strike on 30 May 2018. The trigger for the strike, in a context already marked by unease due to rising commodity prices, was the bill introduced by former Prime Minister Hani Mulki. The new law sought to establish a tax model in keeping with the austerity measures imposed by the IMF in 2016 in exchange for a \$723 million injection of liquidity. As a result of the demonstrations, the King dismissed Mulki and appointed Omar Razzaz as the new Prime Minister on 4 June. The new chief executive withdrew the bill promising new economic measures following the strategy of defensive liberalization that has characterized the Jordanian regime at times of civil unrest. However, these measures were not enough, and the demonstrations have continued, from summer to the present, reflecting the persistence of popular discontent and, in particular, that of the discouraged youth.

An Oasis of Peace in the Midst of Chaos?

The situation in the region in recent years has been particularly tumultuous, with intense armed conflicts and a high level of insecurity. It was further exacerbated by the emergence of Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, the Hashemite Kingdom has always managed to maintain a high level of stability and security with few, although not non-existent, terrorist attacks or armed threats. Support for the Salafist movement and Daesh has increased in some regions, especially in the south of the country, in provinces such as Karak or Ma'an. This increase in support by certain sectors of the youth in recent years can be explained by two closely related dimensions. First, the economic hardships that these young people face and the meagre expectations of improvement in their social status and lack of venues for political participation are effectively wielded by the Salafist and terrorist organizations to attract them to their causes and demands. Second, the identity crisis that certain sectors are experiencing due to the weakening of the tribal bond leaves a vacuum that organizations such as Daesh have successfully leveraged to forge new shared identities (Yom and Sammour, 2017).

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It is worth noting that this context of chaos and regional violence, which Jordan has managed to stay out of, has also been strategically used by the monarchy through a “discourse of fear.” The King has linked the possibility for political change called for by the movements of unrest to the chaos in neighbouring countries, presenting himself as the pillar on which the State's stability depends (Köprülü, 2014). This mechanism has proved relatively successful in the country, which was largely unaffected by the Arab Spring, where the protests, although recurring,

are low-intensity, and in which the opposition has remained loyal to the monarchy.

Conclusions

For Jordan, 2018 was generally a year devoid of major processes of political or economic change, but whose progress reinforced the socio-political dynamics of recent years. Although the country has stayed within the bounds of relative stability and political continuity, no analyst would define it as solid and well founded. On the contrary, there is increasing evidence of deep cracks in the very foundations of the regime of which we can only see the very surface. With a society primarily made up of young people who are educated but without hope, a powerful identity crisis, a corrupt and precarious economy that relies on international aid and alliances, and a tribal social structure that is less and less compelling for its members, it is increasingly complicated to determine how much longer the regime's traditional strategy, based on defensive liberalization and a discourse of fear, will be able to contain the no-longer-so-latent demands for greater democracy within a framework of stability. The political situation of a country in which nothing ever seems to happen is now defined by uncertainty.

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