The Situation in Jordan: a General Overview

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The Hashemite Kingdom and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring and the disquietude it brought to the region since its beginnings in 2011 has put heavy pressure on the long-established regimes in the Mediterranean Middle East, although monarchies seemed less affected and threatened by it than their republican neighbours. Still, not every monarchy was given the same odds by observers, and whenever pundits referred to the revolutionary wave spilling into the monarchies, Jordan was the prime suspect for breakdown in the region – right after Bahrain with its mass uprisings and their violent squashing. This is not surprising, given that since Jordan’s very inception, its demise has been forecast numerous times. In fact, the challenges the Hashemite Kingdom faces today – popular discontent, tribal unrest, a weak economy and the civil war in neighbouring Syria – are serious and erode Jordan’s stability. The elections of 23 January, 2013 and their aftermath, instead of pacifying the domestic situation by serving as an outlet for citizens’ dissatisfaction and reaffirming the popular approval of the King’s “reform path,” became another source of destabilising insecurity. Government and Parliament formation and consolidation is still in process and any political process remains further deadlocked with the failure to enact any meaningful reforms. However, given the “normalisation” of protest activity and Jordan’s geopolitical importance as a stabilising anchor in the region, revolutionary change still seems a highly unlikely outcome.

A Weak Economy at the Epicentre of Middle East Dynamics

Structural prerequisites are of high importance in a country like Jordan, a small country bereft of natural resources and located “between Iraq and a hard place,” almost in the middle of the turbulent Middle East. Naturally, it is one of the first to be affected by any kinds of regional developments, such as those following the Arab Spring that are sweeping through the region. Indeed, protest activity in Jordan was fanned by protests in other Arab countries, as popular discontent on economic and political grounds began to find a voice on a more regular basis as of 2011. However, the regional factor is a two-sided coin, and just as the early successes of Tunisians and Egyptians may have inspired some Jordanian protesters, the Syrian civil war has illustrated the worst possible outcome of an open confrontation between the regime and its population. This factor partly explains why the demands of the opposition are still overwhelmingly phrased in terms of islah – reform – not isqat al-nizam – fall of the regime – and why, while the government may be unpopular and even the King has ceased to be beyond reproach in public discourse, the monarchy as a system is not questioned. On the other hand, the constant influx of Syrian refugees – slowly but surely approaching the half-a-million mark – is putting a heavy strain on Jordan’s already weak economy.

Although Jordan is practically free of natural resources, it exhibits characteristics of a “rentier state,” with foreign aid working as an oil rent substitute. With its help, the extensive social welfare net and the provision of state posts allowing patronage and broad co-optation can be sustained; although buying off the opposition takes a much more humble form in Jordan than in the Gulf States. Jordan began to amass aid rents as its importance grew as a buffer or bulwark State against Israel, revolutionary republics and unstable States in the region, making it important to its neighbours as well as to Western powers. It is one of the most vital US allies in the Arab Middle East, especially since the US' favourite, Hosni Mubarak, who received an even larger amount of aid money, was ousted in Egypt. Jordan is a regular recipient of large sums of US and GCC foreign aid and also profits from EU payments, like those in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Its importance to the Gulf States in turbulent times was emphasised with the issue of an invitation to join the GCC along with Morocco in 2011. Seen from that angle, the problem of the large numbers of Syrian refugees can be turned into an asset and attract even more foreign funding, just as was the case during the earlier Palestinian and Iraqi refugee waves.

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Still, a spill-over from Syria would be highly destabilising and long-term political and economic planning is becoming even harder for the cash-stripped State. Like an oil rentier, Jordan is dependent on regular payments from abroad which it cannot control, and large sections of the annual budget are planned on the assumption that foreign funds will keep coming. How explosive that dependence could be was drastically demonstrated in November 2012, after the government announced the drop in fuel subsidies as demanded by the IMF, sending gas and petrol prices through the roof. This measure was undertaken to attain an IMF grant, when money promised by Saudi Arabia failed to arrive in time. Following that announcement, riots of an unprecedented scale broke out in all parts of the country, in which rioters set tyres ablaze, stormed two police stations and attempted to storm the Prime Minister’s residence. It was also the first time sustained calls for the fall of the regime were heard. It was a week before the fighting subsided. Although the cuts were not taken back, cash compensations were announced. While this may have calmed the storm for now, further cuts, especially in energy subsidies, are expected this year. What these riots also demonstrated was that the economy is the number one powder keg, even before dissatisfaction over political reform.

Opposition Protests and Regime Reaction

In contrast to prominent Arab Spring countries where change did indeed take place, the opposition in Jordan is very fragmented and – possibly with the exception of corruption – has no consensus whatsoever over the most important issues and aims. There is also a high level of distrust between the different groups, especially along the Transjordanian-Palestinian cleavage. Adding to this, there are also loyalist factions independent of the regime who attack what they see as threats to the country; clashes between opposition and loyalist groups often end violently, forcing the riot police to step in. While especially poorer classes are only concerned with the amelioration of the economic situation, others, especially among the urban and young population, lament the deficient political representation and participation rights; most of the rural Transjordanians on the other hand fear that more political participation will strengthen the Palestinian Jordanians, the majority in the country. They also demand an expansion of the social welfare system, while criticising “neoliberalism” which they associate with Palestinian influence. However, in contrast to previous protests, traditionally loyal elements from the Transjordanian tribes also form a significant group among the protesters, subsumed under the term Hirak – movements. The fragmentation of the opposition can mean two con-
tradictory consequences for the regime. Giving in to popular demand can mean many different things, as there is no clear definition of what this constitutes. Doing so may therefore severely limit what the King or the government can and cannot do, as fulfilling the demands of one side means rejecting those of another. At the same time, it also allows more freedom of action, as shifting blame for unpopular decisions away from the monarchy to societal or political groups is made easier.

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The monarchy quickly reacted to the Arab Spring in a number of ways. Regionally, Jordan boosted its involvement in the most tumultuous regions – it was one of the few Arab countries to participate in Operation Unified Protector, the NATO operation that brought Colonel Gaddafi down in Libya; and King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to call on Bashar al-Assad to step down, although Jordan still tries to avoid taking sides in Syria directly to avoid being dragged into the violent conflict on its border. Domestically, the King has initiated a large number of reforms since 2011 and called for early parliamentary elections in 2013. In contrast to the likes of Libya, Syria or Bahrain, no heavy and systematic repression of dissent was employed, although security presence was clearly raised. Instead, the focus lay on a policy of co-optation and slight concessions towards mostly cosmetic political reforms. King Abdullah formed a constitutional court and committees for amending the Constitution and reforming the controversial electoral law, including the formation of an Independent Electoral Commission for the first time. The elections to the Lower House of Parliament in January 2013 were hailed as a milestone by domestic and even some international observers, who described them as clean. They saw the election of more reform-oriented MPs, a record number of 18 women and an “unprecedented” turnout of 56.6% (up 3% from 2010), despite the boycott of the strongest political party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political wing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. King Abdullah also issued some “discussion papers” on reform topics and announced that he would no longer directly appoint the Prime Minister, who will from now on be chosen by the Parliament – a change that was indeed enacted after the January elections and led to months-long negotiations. While the Prime Minister has finally been chosen – former PM Abdallah Nsour returned to his office – the negotiation process between the parliamentary blocs was slow and tenacious, since many blocs were mere ad-hoc coalitions without significant coherence, and, to avoid responsibility, did not even name a candidate for Prime Minister. Consequently, the newly reconfirmed Nsour was almost immediately faced with a no-confidence vote, which he marginally won in mid-April. Soon thereafter, an opposition bloc was formed in the Lower House showing that intra-parliamentary strife will probably continue for a while yet.

Change and Continuity

When looking at all these regional, international and domestic developments, it is hard to imagine how little has actually changed in Jordanian politics. Although reforms were numerous, their substance is often left open to question. The most prominent and controversial case is that of the electoral law, which is still based on the “one man-one vote” (sawt wahid) principle dating from 1993. It was originally introduced to prevent events like the surprise landslide victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1989 from happening again and to strengthen the traditional bedrock of the Hashemite monarchy, rural Transjordanians. Essentially a first-past-the-post system, it provides a single non-transferable vote, with candidates competing for a direct vote on the district level while only the majority candidate wins a parliamentary seat. When presented with just one vote for a candidate rather than a party, (Trans-)Jordanians tend to vote along tribal rather than party or programmatic lines. In addition, extensive gerrymandering once again favours rural and tribal areas over urban and Palestinian ones, especially the northern
cities of Amman and Zarqa. Thus, this electoral system produces a heavy tilt towards regime loyalists, with large parts of the opposition as well as the Palestinian Jordanians widely excluded from the electoral process. Although a new ballot has been introduced, giving 27 (of 150 total seats) to party lists, thereby slightly increasing the opposition element in Parliament, the core of the system remains the same. As the party system is underdeveloped, the party lists also resemble ad-hoc patronage coalitions, more than actual parties with a programme, especially since the only properly organised party, the IAF, has boycotted the elections. Coalitions of opposition groups have until now failed to consolidate into parties or party-substitutes and still lack coherence.

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The coexistence of change and continuity is also visible in the parliamentary negotiations. While Parliament formation has never taken so long, indicating real negotiation and bargaining processes, the prime actors – elected to Parliament via the deficient and biased electoral law – are still predominantly established loyalist Transjordanians and do not reflect the variety of demands among the general population. Although the carousel of Prime Ministers might have come to an end after five exchanges since 2011 with the election of the new and old Prime Minister Nsour, his election also signifies continuity as does the appointment of another former PM, Fayez Tarawneh, who, in contrast to Nsour, is known for his staunch conservatism, to Chief of the Royal Court, an institution that is more powerful than Parliament. Another conservative who returned to his old post is Saad Hayel Srou, who was again elected speaker of Parliament. The “new” ministers in the cabinet were also mostly old faces, as the cabinet shuffle was mostly constituted by portfolio changes.

The Hashemite Kingdom – Persistence Against All Odds?

As is apparent from the various sources of grievances and their expressions in regular demonstrations, Jordan is far from being a cradle of stability. In recent weeks, violent clashes at universities form an additional concern with reports that tribal violence at universities has doubled since the regular protesting began. However, at this time, not all odds are against the Kingdom which has already defied many pivotal challenges in its history, against all predictions. The protests, while still ongoing, are no longer attracting mass support, there is no united opposition movement and Jordan is a crucial partner of both the West and the GCC States who all have a vital interest in the stability of the country. While the credibility of the King still hinges on an amelioration of the economic situation and more credible political reforms, the most dangerous part seems to be over – for now.

Other References

