

Jordan: A Time for Elections and Assessing Political Reforms

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As the situation stands today, it would appear that Jordan is unable to match the radical political changes seen recently in the Arab World, in the likes of Tunisia and Egypt, and which are currently knocking on the doors of Yemen, Libya and Syria. Nevertheless, Jordan is fully engaged in a country-wide debate between its social and political components regarding how the political reform and democratic transformation should be carried out and on what basis.

While it is true that this debate had been ongoing many months before the Bouazizi incident in Tunisia, it has now been given fresh impetus and is being taken more seriously following the outbreak of Arab revolutions that have marked this new era in Arab history, known as the “Arab Spring.”

Two fundamental reasons help to explain why this seemingly new era of political change may not be able to embrace Jordan as well, which might find itself outside of the “Arab Spring.” The first is that the Jordanian political regime, in marked contrast to many Arab regimes, is characterised by a high degree of flexibility and the ability to manoeuvre. This enables the regime to engage the public opinion with a host of political initiatives, which keep people waiting for their possible outcomes. Added to this are frequently changing governments – as well as parliaments more recently – which all helps to keep Jordanians in a state of constant wariness. Large segments of the population, however, believe that despite all of this, the movement can succeed.

The second reason, on the other hand, is more significant and relates to the internal, vertical division in Jordanian society between its two basic components: Jordanians of Palestinian origin and East Jordanians.

Sadly, this division is further exacerbated by influential powers from both within and outside the regime, which contribute to the current situation and polarisation in Jordanian society. The unfortunate result is a growing atmosphere of mistrust, mutual fears and accusations between influential elites from both sides of the equation or, to be more precise, from both communities. Furthermore, this division acts as a barrier, preventing both communities from creating a common national agenda; one that embraces Jordanians, regardless of their origins or religion.

This phenomenon has been particularly visible during the last six months, and the impact of the division is reflected in the country’s process of political reform and democratic transformation. This was further demonstrated when hundreds of youths gathered in the Interior Ministry Square for a sit-in demonstration in the heart of Amman, like their counterpart youths had done in Cairo and Yemen. This was made out to be a purely Palestinian move to overthrow the regime and create an alternative home for Palestinians. In reaction to this interpretation, hundreds of young people from Jordanian tribes in the governorates made their way to Amman to save it from the Palestinian threat, which ultimately – and regrettably – led to unprecedented tension between both communities and damaged national unity among Jordanians.

Who Is Behind the Demonstrations?

During the last six months, thousands of demonstrators and protestors have openly taken to the streets, representing all quarters and political schools and trends, although pressing for different agendas and chanting different slogans. The main opposition comprised Islamic parties (the Muslim Brotherhood), leftists and nationalists, as well as trade unions, syndicates and civil society organisations. All of these

parties demand political and constitutional reforms, and call for measures to be taken to fight corruption and uphold the sovereignty of law, as well as social justice, a constitutional monarchy, elected governments and parliaments that emerge from free, fair and transparent elections.

In this regard, the Jordanian Islamic Movement – which, it is worth noting, includes Jordanian citizens from different origins – plays a key role throughout. Meanwhile, the youth opposition includes a number of youth organisations and bodies that emerged more or less during the last six months, and seeks inspiration in the events that took place in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Al-Habib Bourguiba street in Tunis and the Square of Change in Sanaa. Indeed, this youth opposition has more radical goals, enjoys a high-spirited drive and has been able to attract young people from other traditional parties; a factor that has affected political parties, other reformist groups and traditional currents, including the conservative one, which might explain the generational conflict seen inside these parties.

A third party to all of this is the traditional Jordanian nationalist current, which is composed of purely Jordanian elements from East Jordan, or the sons of tribes. This current gathered strength after it was joined by “retired military” and tribal heads, and calls for the protection of Jordanian nationality and the strengthening of the pillars that support state institutions, such as the government and parliament. It also aims to enhance the state role and public sector. This current is keen to avoid political reforms in the country that may lead to Palestinians playing a definite or decisive political role – it believes that the country’s economic reforms led to the Palestinians achieving their economic objectives and fear that this situation will repeat itself in the political arena. This all goes hand in hand with other goals, such as demarcation of land for tribes to live on and move around in.

Paradoxically, this current does nothing to hide its anti-Israeli sentiment, openly disapproving of the peace treaty signed between the two countries, while at the same time accusing Palestinians of backing the theory of an “Alternative Home” for the Palestinians. The latter is fuelled by Palestinian demands for full political rights in Jordan, in addition to their social, economic and civil rights. Some elements would even go as far as withdrawing Jordanian nationality from the Palestinians and establishing a political divide and disengagement with the

West Bank, which would mean granting all those coming from the West Bank and Jerusalem with passports issued by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and withdrawing their Jordanian nationality.

How Has the Regime Dealt with the Protest Movements?

Not surprisingly, the resounding upheavals experienced by the Arab region recently, symbolised by the downfall of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes, have sent shock waves through the Arab world – including Jordan and all other Arab regimes – as well as the world at large. Everyone was taken by surprise and left shaken, and fears grew that this may be repeated in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world although the Jordanian regime (like all other Arab regimes) claimed that this would not be the case, pointing out the significant differences between Jordan and Egypt and Tunisia. In fact, the resulting shock and anxiety characterised the regime’s reaction in so far as the street demonstrations were concerned, when it introduced certain measures that would satisfy people’s needs, buying their silence and keeping them in their homes. These included increasing salaries for employees, setting fixed prices on fuel and electricity, the continued support for basic commodities, promises that radical political reforms were underway, allowing citizens to demonstrate, raising the degree of freedom for people to voice views and opinions and giving the press and media greater freedom and independence.

Regrettably, these “soft” measures taken by the regime suddenly began to move in the opposite direction when it was felt that the wave of protests would break certain “red lines.” “Rough” measures were taken to suppress youth attempts to stage a sit-in in the heart of Amman (in the square by the Interior Ministry). Similarly, excessive force was used to halt or suppress the “March to return” to Palestine, where thousands of young people (mostly Palestinians) were trying to demonstrate for the right of return to Palestine on 25th of May 2011.

In connection with this trend, in recent months Jordan has witnessed the phenomenon of gangsters (or sappers), with certain youths carrying out attacks on demonstrators, press workers, the media and opposition figures, by physically striking them, verbally insulting them and even threatening to kill them. On other occasions they have attacked the media and

international news agency offices by destroying their contents. And all this despite the government's disapproval. The opposition and public opinion, however, are convinced that the gangsters are working under the direction and financial support of influential quarters; as was the case in Egypt and Tunisia, or as is now the case in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

Government Reform Initiative

The carrot and stick policy, however, was clearly not going to work in the long run, and was unable to pave the way out of the present deadlock vis-à-vis the political reform process. Jordan does not have the huge sums of money needed to buy the people's silence and win their loyalty, as is the case in the rich Arabian Gulf. Also, historically the Jordanian regime has not been a bloody one, nor has it been known to apply security or military solutions to a purely political problem. It therefore launched its political reform initiative, which aimed to meet the minimum requirements of both demonstrators and public opinion, and at least constituted a safe path: if the regime was able to generate national consensus on this, then the problem would be solved; but if it failed to accomplish that, then the authorities would have bought the extra time it badly needed to see how the course of events would develop in the region as a whole.

This was the context in which the government decision was taken to launch a National Dialogue Committee entrusted with this task, headed by a moderate political figure, the Upper House Speaker Taher Al-Masri. The committee was responsible for formulating electoral law as well as political party law. A royal committee was also set up to prepare suggestions to amend the constitution in a way which would enhance the parliament's authority and would leave the King's powers unchanged, which encompass many areas such as appointing and dissolving the government, dissolving parliament and postponing parliamentary elections.

For its part, the Jordanian Islamic Movement boycotted the National Dialogue Committee, and regarded its formation by the government as a weak initiative with certain limits regarding what may

emerge from it. Meanwhile, other political forces and figures criticised the unbalanced representation inside the committee, since it did not represent all the components of Jordanian Society, notably Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

Not surprisingly, the findings of the committee created widespread national debate in Jordan's social and political spheres. Many political forces saw its recommendations as a moderate step, which neither adhered to the wishes of the Jordanians that took to the streets, nor approved their goals. The continued social protest following the announcement of the NDC results is testament to this belief.

Amazingly, the committee adopted a unique system of electoral law based on a mixed parliament, whereby 88.5% of parliament seats are based on an open proportional list at the governorate level, and 11.5% are based on an open proportional list at the national level, but one that is restricted¹. It was observed that this complicated and unique system responded to two basic challenges or two potential problems, which overshadow the political decision-making machine at the local level. The first of these is preventing the Islamic movement from winning a wide-scale majority in parliament; and the second is ensuring that parliamentary representation of Jordanians of Palestinian origin remains below 20% of the overall number of seats in parliament, despite the fact that they compose at least 50% of the population.

Although the Jordanian public opinion is waiting for the "government initiative" to present both draft laws before parliament (electoral law and political parties law), eyes remain fixed on the constitutional amendments committee. This, however, is expected to do no better than in Morocco, where the recommended amendments affected some of the King's powers. The election results obliged him to choose the Prime Ministers from the largest parliamentary bloc.

So in this context, the constitutional amendments committee is likely to put clearer constraints on the cases where the king can use his power and authority to dissolve parliament. These constraints would also force the government, when demanding the dissolution of the parliament, to submit its own resignation within two weeks of this happening. The amendments are also expected to improve the performance of parliament and the electoral process in general.

¹ "Restricted" proportional open list at the national level means that this list includes 15 seats in parliament out of 130 seats, the overall number of seats in parliament provided that each governorate is represented (there are 12 governorates in the Kingdom in addition to 3 seats for Bedouins).

The Attempt to Join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

On the 10th of May, the Gulf Cooperation Council leader decided to accept Jordan's application for membership in the GCC countries at the end of the 13th consultative summit, acknowledging the fact that the country presented a request to this end 15 years ago. Along with this decision, GCC leaders also extended an invitation to Morocco to join the council, otherwise known as the "Arab Super Rich Club", despite the fact that Morocco had not presented an application. Indeed, this decision was viewed in Arab political circles as an unexpected step and one of great importance. Some political observers described this decision as an attempt to create a "Sunni monarchies club", while others described it as an attempt to recreate the "Baghdad Pact" – an agreement aimed at establishing an alliance among pro-Western countries (or pro-US) in their conflict with the former Soviet Union (USSR) and its satellite countries, during the Cold War.

Indeed this decision must be seen within the context of Saudi Arabia's strategic perspective to confront the challenges and threats the Saudi Arabian Kingdom and its allies are facing, which can be reduced to three areas: Iran and its allies; the approaching Arab revolutions experienced throughout the Arab world, which could endanger the Gulf countries; and the fear of emerging regimes existing beyond Gulf control, not to mention the fear of al-Qaeda and terrorism.

The Gulf's strategic vision is trying to profit from Jordan's extensive experience in the field of security and the military, especially in facing such threats. Evidently this vision is enhanced by the Gulf countries' certainty that the US would provide them with a security umbrella against Iran, and could extend this to a comprehensive war on al-Qaeda, but they are neither able nor willing to protect them from internal revolutions and the fury of their people and the masses.

On the other hand, many Jordanians understandably welcomed the GCC decision to accept Jordan as a member, believing this could solve the problems of unemployment, poverty, low growth and rising energy costs, which is taking its toll on the national economy. But the reformist current and liberals fear the decision might be a way of beginning to build a new "military alliance" to counter the Iranian threat and "the Arab Spring revolutions" simultaneously; a position they would rather not see Jordan occupying. Furthermore, the reformists fear that Jordan may suf-

fer certain practical consequences as a result of joining the GCC, such as possible infringements on human rights (women, minorities, freedom of expression), which would affect the country's future regarding its reform programme and democratic transformation. The alliance has come as a result of the Arab Spring revolutions and aims to counter them. In a way, subjecting Jordan to the "Saudi umbrella and era" implies a social, cultural and religious impact that may result from an extreme Saudi Wahhabi school-of-thought.

Where Is Jordan Heading from here?

It is expected that during the second half of 2011 the constitutional amendments will be ratified, following their presentation by the entrusted committee, and the government is expected to present an electoral draft law and political parties draft law, which are based on the amended constitution for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It was also ensured that the ratification would uphold the parliament, without which no constitutional amendments can take place. However, it is as yet unclear whether the government will present the draft law to parliament or whether these laws will be issued as provisional laws, as has been the case in the different elections over the last 22 years in the Kingdom, which were all held under provisional laws.

Regardless of what happens, the Jordanian monarch is expected to dissolve the 16th parliament before the end of 2011, or by the coming spring at the latest. Fresh calls will then be made for early elections to elect the 17th parliament. If this happens then the Jordanians will have elected three parliaments within five years (2007-2011).

In the wake of the newly suggested electoral draft law, the next parliament can hardly be expected to be any different from previous parliaments, and neither can we expect to see a widespread public drive for a change in the rules of the country's political process. In this regard, there are no signs to indicate any mounting pressure from the international community to press for a breakthrough in this field and enliven the path of political reform and democratic transformation.

Paradoxically, if Jordan's attempts to join the GCC find fresh impetus and are successful, then the agenda of political reform and democratic transformation will be slowed, since most Jordanians are looking for new job opportunities, less economic hardship and improvements in social and living conditions.