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Reform Retreats Amid Jordan's Political Storms

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For weeks in the spring of 2005, banners advertising an international gathering at the Dead Sea resort of Shouna adorned every main street in Jordan's capital city of Amman. The government was touting what it regarded as a significant national success: for the third year in a row, the lightly populated, resource-poor kingdom would host the high-powered World Economic Forum on May 20-22. Jordanian officials were also proud to be hosts of a conference of Nobel laureates convening in Petra around the same time. As the dates of the World Economic Forum approached, however, heavily armed soldiers and commandos soon outnumbered the banners in the streets. Units of the Jordanian army and special forces spread out across the capital, posting armored vehicles at all major interchanges.

The shows of force may have been intended more to reassure the international visitors than to intimidate the Jordanian population, but they underscored how political reform in this US-allied Arab state has repeatedly taken a back seat to the regime's plans for economic development. Since assuming the throne upon the death of his father Hussein in 1999, King Abdallah II has emphasized economic development above all things, with a particular focus on attracting foreign investment and manufacturing more goods for export. The showpiece achievements of Abdallah's foreign policy are Jordan's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2000 and the Free Trade Agreement with the United States that took effect in 2001. Meanwhile, even as the Bush administration and Western commentators herald an "Arab spring" of democratizing change, political reform has stalled.

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

Jordan's political liberalization process has surged forward and fallen backward repeatedly since its inception in 1989. The Hashemite regime began its experiment in limited democratization largely as an attempt to quell widespread protests and rioting triggered by an austerity program prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and by charges of government corruption. The political opening proceeded apace until 1994, when King Hussein signed a peace treaty with Israel, whereupon the regime rolled back previous reforms in an effort to rein in dissent. With the 1999 royal succession, public expectations for reform increased.

The regime's initial moves under the new king appeared to signal a solid commitment to restarting the process of political reform. In the same year of Abdallah's accession, municipal elections were held throughout the kingdom. In 2003, when Jordan held its fourth round of national parliamentary elections since 1989, the electoral law was supplemented by a royal decree reserving six seats in Parliament for women. But for every move toward liberalization, there have been corresponding signs of deliberalization. The 2003 parliamentary contests, originally scheduled for 2001, were twice delayed. During the two years that Parliament was suspended, the king issued a series of controversial edicts creating "temporary laws" that, among other things, imposed additional restrictions on freedom of assembly and press freedoms. In 2002, prominent feminist activist and former parliamentarian Toujan Faisal was arrested and convicted of "defaming" the prime minister and the government. While Faisal was later pardoned and released, she was barred from running in the 2003 elections. Today, pro-democracy activists complain of the increased role of the intelligence services (mukhabarat) in public life.

As political reform retreats, the regime's economic development priorities are increasingly clear in its government appointments, with top ministries going to business people and technocrats fond of neoliberal economics. In the words of one analyst, these new ministers amount to "liberal authoritarians," in that they support economic liberalization far more than they do political reform. "The community running Jordan is made up of English-speaking people with PowerPoint presentations," he continued. "Even in government, they are still business people." Though many of these officials have previously served in government jobs, a conservative former prime minister suggested that the new ministers seem "more like Western consultants" than public servants.

Especially since the start of the liberalization process in 1989, the Jordanian regime has allowed its critics room to dissent from its domestic policies, but has kept foreign policy—or "national security"—off limits to serious opposition. This general tendency was reinforced when the regime signed its peace treaty with Israel. Now, the Jordanian opposition increasingly finds that questions of economic policy are off limits as well. Given the international emphasis of the regime's economic ambitions—specifically, its emphasis on direct foreign investment, tourism

and export-driven development—economic reform may be seen as an increasingly international issue. The government's emphasis on economic development therefore appears to be causally linked to the stalling of the political reform process.

There may be an ethnic dimension to these dynamics as well. The public sector has traditionally been dominated by the ethnic Transjordanians who make up the regime's social base, while the private sector has tended to be a stronghold of Jordanians of Palestinian origin, many of whom are descendants of refugees from the 1948 war or refugees from the 1967 war. Given the ethnic politics underlying the Jordanian political economy, even privatization, seemingly a purely domestic aspect of economic reform, carries a decidedly politicized tinge. It is difficult to even broach the subject of privatization without appearing to be adding to inter-ethnic tensions or undermining the regime's "Jordan First" policy.

A TALE OF TWO CRISES

At the beginning of April 2005, King Abdallah appointed a new prime minister, Adnan Badran, to succeed the dismissed government of Faysal al-Fayiz. The Fayiz government had earned the ire of the king for failing to convince the Arab League to revive the Arab peace initiative originally put forward by Saudi Arabia in Beirut in March 2002. Jordan's proposal to revive the initiative, intended to assert diplomatic leadership for a regime marketing its closeness to Washington, instead drew the derision of Arab delegations who felt that such a move would reward Israeli military actions against the Palestinians. Arab objections focused not only on the substance of the Jordanian initiative, but also on the perceived inappropriateness of its timing. Several veteran Jordanian policymakers shared this view. But within Jordan, anger at the Fayiz government focused not on Arab summitry, but on the government's controversial attempts to change the laws on professional associations, political parties and the right of free assembly.

The government submitted draft laws it insisted were cornerstones of Jordan's political reform program. But in each case the draft laws actually increased restrictions upon civil society. A draft law on political parties prohibited political and party activities from taking place in clubs, mosques and educational institutions. Parties would further be banned from political activities within Jordan's professional associations. The associations, meanwhile, were to be the subject of still another draft law, curbing their political activities and even changing their leadership selection procedures from direct elections by all members to selection by nebulous "commissions." Non-governmental organizations also came under the watchful eye of the Ministry of the Interior, which announced its intention to review carefully foreign sources of funding and even to shut down NGOs suspected of being overly susceptible to foreign influence.

Pro-democracy activists reverse the charge of foreign influence. In the words of one, "There is a huge gap between the king's reform rhetoric and the actual policies. It's like they are doing all this to impress the West.... We are actually cutting back on the freedom of the people." The draft laws turned into a kind of showdown between the interior minister and the professional associations, as well as influential parties such as the Islamic Action Front (IAF). With the dismissal of the Fayiz government, including his unpopular interior minister, Samir Habashneh, the latter groups felt they had won a victory.

But soon angry parliamentarians were also mobilizing against the new Badran government, in a crisis that has yet to be resolved. By late May, the list of MPs in the lower house threatening to withhold their vote of confidence in Badran had grown to 48 out of 110. The MPs charged that the makeup of Badran's government had been sprung on them out of nowhere. They argued that it under-represented almost the entire southern part of the country, especially ethnic Transjordanian strongholds such as Kerak. The prime minister insisted that the allocation of posts in the new government was based not on ethnic or geographic considerations, but rather on expertise and qualifications. He thereby unwittingly insulted the entire parliament (none of whom were included in the cabinet) and perhaps even all of southern Jordan.

Members of Parliament objected not only to who was apparently excluded from the cabinet, but also to who was included—specifically the cabinet's economic team with its neoliberal priorities. The main complaints center on the regime's emphasis on export-oriented growth, foreign aid and foreign investment, along with its lesser emphasis on social welfare and income distribution. Of the new team, by far the most controversial is current Minister of Finance Basim Awadallah. As a minister in the previous Fayiz government, Awadallah had managed, largely by his impatient manner, to antagonize many legislators. "The reformers in the government are just not credible people," said one analyst. "Basim Awadallah may be brilliant. But the thrust of the no-confidence movement against the government is against him more than anyone or anything else."

With 48 MPs officially opposed to the new government, and 17 IAF members sitting on the fence, parliamentarians submitted a request for an extraordinary session. The extraordinary session would presumably be held sometime during the summer, but in any case before the October 1, 2005 regular session is slated to begin. The king did not immediately respond, but did remark to the press that dissolving parliament was not an option. This remark suggested that the session will take place, but a no-confidence vote is not certain to be on the agenda, since the agenda is set by the monarchy.

If a vote were held, the Badran government would almost certainly lose, in what would be a major defeat for the regime. Yet several other possibilities remain. Many pro-democracy activists expect that the mukhabarat will "cajole, persuade and perhaps even threaten" MPs to change their positions. Alternatively, a cabinet reshuffle prior to the vote could easily address

issues of representativeness of the south, while presumably replacing some of the most polarizing appointments. Finally, it is possible that the Badran government could actually win the confidence vote, if the prime minister can persuade IAF MPs to vote for him. In a series of meetings with the prime minister, IAF parliamentarians made several demands, including implementation of sharia law and abandonment of the peace treaty with Israel. These measures have no chance of approval from the government, and so the IAF may in effect have to vote against the government in order simply to ensure some level of credibility. Indeed, the IAF may be under even more pressure to bolster its own credibility than is otherwise apparent, given that it is viewed by many Jordanians “on the street” as having been coopted by the regime.

Yet the Islamist party may be willing to risk that credibility, if it can secure a commitment from the new government to abandon the draconian draft laws on associations, parties and assembly. Since the IAF remains the country’s best-organized political party, and since Islamists have won the elections for leadership of each major professional association, they would have much to gain from such a reversal. Sadly, while the IAF has sounded decidedly progressive in its defense of the parties and associations, the party has echoed the state’s reactionary line on NGOs, decrying the “foreign influences” on groups working under the “guise” of women’s empowerment, democratization or human rights. Aside from this clear contradiction regarding civil society, however, the IAF may have worked its way into a corner in which it will lose something whichever way it votes on the Badran government.

AN ERODING BASE?

While this wrangling continues, polling by Jordan’s Center for Strategic Studies has shown a steady decline in public confidence in successive governments, including the new Badran administration. Public dissatisfaction appears to be based on a very accurate read of these government shifts as little but reshuffling and recycling of elites. There is also a basic demand for democracy that may be reaching a kind of tipping point. Parliamentarians and civil society activists have increasingly called for a democratically elected government wherein the prime minister and cabinet would be drawn in large part from the elected parliament itself rather than appointed by the monarchy. The emphasis by some regime officials on the current crisis as a north-south or even a Palestinian-Transjordanian issue may be intended to deflect the focus from this deeper issue of democratic representation. The “ethnic divide” remains the wedge issue in Jordanian politics; anyone who so much as notes its existence can be made to appear backward-looking and even un-Jordanian.

What should be most troubling to the regime, however, is that these vocal objections to its government choices are coming from a largely gerrymandered parliament. Jordanian electoral districts are unequal in size, and the electoral law over-represents rural conservative districts

while under-representing urban areas that tend to be bastions of Palestinian or Islamist support. The strategy has worked as intended, yielding a parliament made up overwhelmingly of ethnic Transjordanian conservatives, and at times governed by tribal affiliations rather than secular left or religious right party loyalties. Yet it is this parliament that is on a collision course with the monarchy's chosen government. Critics within the parliament even include the powerful and conservative Transjordanian speaker, Abd al-Hadi al-Majali.

Opposition to the government's continued emphasis on economic over political reform has for some time included Jordan's fairly weak secular left parties as well as the more well-organized Islamist movement. The opposition is mainly opposition to policies and priorities, not opposition to the Hashemite state. Yet if this opposition to large aspects of the state's agenda is starting to include many elements of conservative, Transjordanian and even Bedouin society, then where exactly is the regime's base of support?

Perhaps fearing an eroding political base, in early June King Abdallah issued a new order, setting aside shares of privatized companies to be offered at reduced prices to past and present members of the security forces. Like the public sector in general, the security forces tend to be bastions of ethnic Transjordanian power, and so the king's announcement appears to shore up this traditional base of the monarchy in a very material way. The new policy applies to members (including retirees) of the public security department, the civil defense forces, the armed forces and the mukhabarat. All are now eligible quite literally to profit from the privatization process. The policy may help the monarchy achieve three goals simultaneously: it allocates direct benefits to the domestic security apparatus, it allows the economic reform process to continue and finally—and most importantly—it may undercut much of the Transjordanian opposition to privatization and economic reform, as well as the current slate of neoliberal ministers.

ANOTHER STORM TO WEATHER

In concert with such pork barrel politics, and in the absence of substantive political reform, the regime has launched a series of "initiatives" accompanied by major marketing campaigns that seem to play better with Western creditors than with the Jordanian population. "Jordan First" was succeeded or at least augmented by "political development" and now the new call is for a "national agenda" to be launched by September 2005. Pro-democracy activists in Jordan argue that these initiatives generate plenty of conferences and workshops, but little material change. The question is how long the wheel spinning can continue, and for that matter, why it should. Even the regime would benefit from meaningful political reform that would buy it some popular support—and thereby enhance its security. Many Jordanians would be content with incremental progress. "People are not in the streets here really," said one analyst. "This isn't the same as

the Kifaya movement [in Egypt], at least not yet.” But whether because of resistance from the mukhabarat or for other reasons, the wheels keep on spinning.

As the crisis of confidence in the government continues at several levels, another crisis may loom ever closer. Previous bouts of unrest in the kingdom, such as the riots of 1989 and 1996, have often been triggered by austerity measures. But with the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the rise of a new Iraqi government, Jordan no longer gets its oil supplies at artificially low prices. Rather, Arab Gulf monarchies are increasingly charging Jordan full prices, even as these skyrocket to previously unthinkable levels. The Jordanian government budget simply cannot absorb the difference between the rising cost of imports and subsidized in-country oil and gas prices. Some “adjustment” of prices, probably over the summer, will likely occur, possibly triggering unrest once again. International aid to maintain current prices would avoid this scenario, but at present such a dollar influx does not appear to be forthcoming. The already unpopular neoliberal and technocratic economic team in government may, in short, have yet another storm to weather.