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Post–2011 Pluralism and Inclusion in Jordan: Rhetoric vs. Reality

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In many ways, Jordan is the model for what a successful Arab Spring could have looked like. Governed by a monarchy that is accepted as legitimate by the overwhelming majority of the population—and as a necessary unifying force for the country's different ethnic groups—as well as a relatively benign, if authoritarian, political system, Jordan possessed all the elements for a successful and smooth transition to a more pluralistic political system. But this potential has not been realized. King Abdullah II started his reign in 1999 with much hope for creating a more pluralistic political system and an inclusive social framework. But by the start of the Arab uprisings, rhetoric had supplanted any serious reform process. The status quo forces—best exemplified by the Security Services—had by then successfully resisted the king's last serious effort to introduce reforms in 2005. The National Agenda, an inclusive effort initiated by the king to agree on a national blueprint for political, economic, and social reform, was torpedoed by the conservative ruling elite precisely because it promised a pluralistic, inclusive society that would have threatened the patronage system that largely benefited these forces.

The protests the country witnessed in 2011 and 2012—small in size compared to the ones in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, or Yemen, yet still unprecedented in Jordanian history—did cause some alarm within the government. In response, some reforms were implemented,

though they were hardly sufficient. A royal committee produced a new, more proportional and inclusive electoral law, only for it to be immediately shelved. Constitutional amendments were also introduced, most notably the establishment of a constitutional court, though these changes were largely procedural and certainly did not result in a more balanced distribution of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities.

By 2013, efforts to establish a more inclusive political system in Jordan had yet again been abandoned by the regime once public pressure for reforms subsided. Protests died down as the populace feared the country might face a similar fate as Syria, Yemen, or Egypt, and the regime mistakenly took the absence of protests as a *carte blanche* to resume business as usual. Further constitutional amendments were introduced, this time to give the king sole authority to appoint all heads of the security establishment as well as members of the Senate. In addition, two electoral laws introduced in 2013 and 2016 marginally improved the existing system but did little to further the political process and produce an effective, independent, and party-based parliament. Among the three arms that constitute the executive branch—namely, the government, the royal court, and the Security Services—decision-making has decidedly shifted away from the government toward the latter two entities. Given that only government officials can be held



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accountable in the executive branch, this shift in executive authority leaves Jordan politically less inclusive than it was before 2011. Constitutional amendments further concentrated power in the king's hands, and the regime's tolerance for opposing views has continuously deteriorated.

The Arab Spring had a major effect on the country's only real opposition force: the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the Jordanian affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood. Popular disappointment with the performance of Islamists in several neighboring Arab countries and the government's sustained efforts to fragment the group have succeeded at breaking the aura of "holiness" that surrounded the IAF. Today, the group is largely reduced to inefficacy and irrelevance in parliament, due in part to an electoral law biased against it by ensuring that no organized political faction can assemble a sizable bloc in parliament on a national scale. In the aftermath of major changes in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries in the region, the IAF was compelled to reevaluate its traditional positions. There are early indications that some members in senior leadership positions—most notably, the party's second-in-command Zaki Bani Ersheid—are pushing in favor of a more open-minded view toward secular actors and a less confrontational attitude toward the government.

The semi-rentier system Jordan has operated under since its establishment is reaching its limits. The kingdom's dependence on outside aid to finance its bloated bureaucracy or its political elite can no longer be sustained. Aid from the U.S. is maxing out at \$1.25 billion a year,¹ and the decline in oil prices has pushed Saudi Arabia—Jordan's main regional financial backer—into abandoning its traditional policy of providing free aid to friendly countries.

Domestically, the government pays the salaries of 42% of the Jordanian workforce, one of the highest rates in the world. Due to the above-mentioned financial constraints, the government is no longer in a position to afford such an expansive public employment policy. Public debt is also rising dramatically, and currently stands at a dangerously

high level of 95% of GDP.² The official unemployment rate is an exceptionally high 18% and, more alarmingly, youth unemployment exceeds 30%.³

The regime is aware that the country's economic system is not sustainable, judging from statements by the prime minister and key ministers in the government. However, past attempts at economic reform were met with great resistance both from the ranks of the political elite unwilling to move to a merit-based system and from government leaders who are either unwilling or unable to transition to an economy more dependent on the private sector for job creation and growth.

The erosion of the political, economic, and social elements of the old social contract has resulted in a significant "trust gap" between citizens and the state in Jordan. Citizens are increasingly suspicious of a political process that has form but not substance. The two parliamentary elections held after the Arab Spring protests in 2013 and 2016 have not assured citizens they have a bigger voice in decision-making. A 2016 national poll conducted by the International Republican Institute showed that 87% of Jordanians could not name one positive achievement of the outgoing parliament, and that confidence in the Abdullah Ensour administration (2012–2016) had dropped significantly.⁴

To hedge his symbolic capital with peripheral (and more liberal) constituencies, the monarch continues to publish "discussion papers" outlining his wish for a mature democracy—an inclusive aspiration, yet one with no tangible mechanism for implementation or indicators that the executive branch (as headed by the king) has any plans to put it into action.

The current decline in global oil prices, which are expected to remain low for several years, if not permanently, will present significant challenges for all rentier economies in the region. The decline in oil revenues is increasing the pressure on governments to improve their economic performance toward greater efficiency and to shift from welfare states to those based on merit and private sector-led growth.

As Jordanians are asked to continue to make sacrifices in the face of reduced subsidies, fewer government jobs, and less government support in general, they are unlikely to remain silent if they are denied a larger share in the decision-making process through a liberalization of the political structure. Indeed, popular protests in Salt, Kerak, and Madaba, to name a few, have re-emerged in response to price increases on 170 commodities announced by the government. Although these protests are relatively small in size at this point, the slogans raised by protesters have crossed all previous red lines in their criticisms of the political system.

The end of the old social contracts led to the first wave of Arab uprisings across the region. The end of rentierism might usher in a second wave of unrest, brought about by the perfect storm of shrinking economic resources and closed political systems.

Unless regimes in the region are able to internalize the main lesson of the Arab Spring—namely that authoritarianism is no longer sustainable or tolerated—and move toward greater inclusion in their political and economic systems, the future of the region is bleak. In Jordan, the ruling elite still refuse to acknowledge that maintaining the status quo is detrimental to the country's social fabric and interests. So far, the system has failed to develop a healthy national identity that is inclusive of the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of Jordanian society. To do this, a new social contract should be negotiated among different segments of the population, one that will ensure the collective and individual rights of all groups and prevent any one group from imposing its political, social, or religious views on others. Only through such a new social contract can the monopoly of the political elite—and the economic elite that lends support for, and whose interests are closely tied to, the regime—can begin to loosen.

The status of women has not been particularly impacted by the Arab Spring. Although women constitute a small majority among students attending universities in the country, women's participation in the workforce stands at a dismal 14%, among the lowest in the region, and has not

improved in over a decade.⁵ There are many discriminatory clauses against women in Jordanian laws covering issues such as social security, labor, and civil status, and little progress has been made toward removing them.

Adding to Jordan's problems is the Syrian refugee crisis. It has put significant strain on the country's educational and health infrastructure, the budget, and an already dire water shortage. History shows that only a small share of refugees ever return to their home country. If this historical trend holds, Jordan will have to deal with the addition of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees on its soil in the medium-term and, by extension, the effect that population would have on the country's national identity.

The Arab uprisings have shown that the region sorely lacks a modern concept of citizenship. The old paradigm in which citizens are regarded as mere subjects that should not have a meaningful say in running their own affairs must evolve if the future of the region is to improve.

The concept of equal citizenship for all—regardless of gender, political orientation, religion, or ethnic origin—must be enshrined in any new social contract. Only by empowering all citizens through the idea that they are equal before the law can they realize their full social, economic, and political potential. As it stands, many Arab countries have promoted narrow forms of nationalism that emphasize the prominence of certain groups over others. These countries need to focus instead on creating strong national identities that trump all other allegiances. The Arab world's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity should be regarded as a strength rather than a weakness if societies are to evolve in a healthy manner.

The challenges facing Jordan are real, but not insurmountable. The economic situation cannot be remedied overnight, but it cannot be left untouched either. It is becoming clear that economic reform can no longer take place without a parallel political reform process. Jordan is in dire need of a new social contract, one that regards all citizens as equal and gives them a meaningful voice as the country attempts

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to address its economic situation. Embarking on this transformation requires above all the political will to change the traditional, rentier-based way the country is managed—politically, economically, and socially. But so far, that political will has been lacking.

ENDNOTES

1. Data on U.S. foreign aid to Jordan can be found at: <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/Jordan>. Accessed August 7, 2018.

2. Data on public debt can be found at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/385716/national-debt-of-jordan-in-relation-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp>. Accessed August 7, 2018.

3. Data on unemployment rate can be found at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=JO>. Accessed August 7, 2018.

4. "Jordan: Economy Breeds Widespread Dissatisfaction with Government," International Republican Institute, June 20, 2016, <http://www.iri.org/resource/jordan-economy-breeds-widespread-dissatisfaction-government>.

5. Data on labor force participation can be found at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.FE.ZS?locations=JO>. Accessed August 7, 2018.

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