

RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM AND NATIONAL SECURITY: LIBERALISATION AND DE-LIBERALISATION IN JORDAN UNDER KING ABDULLAH II

LÁSZLÓ CSICSMANN*

*assistant professor, Institute for International Studies,
Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary; E-mail: laszlo.csicsmann@uni-corvinus.hu*

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Political liberalisation in Jordan was launched as a regime survival strategy in 1989 by the late King Hussein. In spite of his efforts, 18 years later the Jordanian monarchy is considered as a semi-authoritarian system. This article explores the prospects for further political liberalisation under King Abdullah II, whose vision on the development of Jordan is full of enthusiasm. The author argues that Jordan is one of the most-advanced countries in the region in terms of political reform, but it has performed poorly in comparison to other developing states. King Abdullah promotes the “Jordan model” in order to win the support of the international audience: Western-oriented foreign policy, economic liberalisation allowing multinational companies to invest in Jordan, launching the Ministry of Political Development, and holding general elections in 2003. Political developments in Jordan echoed with the so-called “developmental state” paradigm, prioritising economic reform first, while postponing political transformation. National elections are expected to be held at the end of this year under a controversial election law. The recently passed political parties law is a proof of a de-liberalising monarchy, which is trying to preserve the loyalty of independent candidates, while marginalising the role of political parties. This paper deals with the external and the internal factors of political liberalisation in Jordan.

Keywords: Jordan; King Abdullah II; liberalisation; Islam(ism), elections; developmental state

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1. INTRODUCTION

The durable authoritarianism of Middle Eastern regimes has attracted special attention from scholars, politicians and decision-makers all around the world. The *Arab Human Development Report 2004* – which was mainly written by non-Western experts – argued that the Arab World is in a human development crisis rooted in the absence of good governance and political freedoms in the region (UNDP 2005). As John Waterbury remarked in his essay, the third wave of worldwide democratisation totally by-passed the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Waterbury 1994). Although the thesis of Middle Eastern *exceptionalism* during the Cold War was widely acknowledged within academic circles, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the persistent political reforms initiated by Middle Eastern regimes has challenged this assumption.

The so-called transition paradigm of the 1990s – shaped by radical political changes in Eastern Europe – maintained the argument that “any country moving *away* from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition *toward* democracy” (Carothers 2002). According to this theory the prospect for democratisation in the Middle East is fundamentally positive, that is to say, the ongoing political and economic reforms in the region can be viewed as part of the transition process. However, nearly two decades have gone, and none of the Arab countries can be characterised as a liberal democracy (or electoral democracy),¹ but as liberalised autocracies (Brumberg 2003), or illiberal democracies (Zakaria 2003).

Nearly all of the Arab countries have remained in the ‘grey zone’, somewhere between liberal democracy and totalitarian dictatorship.² The political liberalisation of certain Arab states is part of their regime’s survival strategy in the face of a growing opposition, a demographic pressure, and a declining standard of living. External forces and the broader international community were also advocating the political opening of authoritarian systems. Democracy is viewed by the authoritarian regimes as an instrument of political bargaining to strengthen the fundamentals of the regime, and not as a final goal. Political liberalisation often followed by waves of de-liberalisation in the Arab world, namely in these regimes which are not in a state of permanent transition, suggests that their political development has got stuck.

The Jordanian monarchy is a classical example of a liberalising and de-liberalising regime in the Arab World. In 1989 the late King Hussein opened up the political system that resulted in regularly organised elections, a certain level of negative and positive liberties, a vibrant civil society and the creation of more than 30 political parties. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Jordanian media is under state control, the Parliament is marginalised, leaders of the opposition are often intimidated and new laws severely restrict personal freedoms. Under the

reign of King Abdullah II (1999–) these internal political trends have been continued.

The aim of this essay is to analyse the current Jordanian political discourse on political liberalisation in the era of King Abdullah II. This paper focuses on the interaction of international, regional and internal factors which influenced political decisions taken by the regime. The outbreak of the *Al-Aqsa intifada* in 2000, the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and recent wars in Iraq and Lebanon reinforced the image of the Hashemite Kingdom as a moderate and liberalised monarchy in a turbulent region. King Abdullah II tried to divert attention of his dissatisfied population by launching positive sounding initiatives such as the *Jordan First* and the *National Agenda 2006–2015*. On 2 March 2007 King Abdullah II dissolved the Parliament and announced elections for later this year. The upcoming national elections in 2007 raise the expectations of many experts on the future of political reforms. However, rapid regime change is unlikely in the short run, in spite of the existence of a reform-oriented elite and public audience.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When King Abdullah I arrived in *Ma'an*'s railway station on 21 November 1920, Transjordan was nothing more than an under-populated desert area without any resources to foster the economic well-being of its inhabitants. The survival of the emirate was dependent on extensive British financial and military support. This is to say that Transjordan was merely a security state under a British mandate (Robins 2004: 29). The famous Arab Legion established in 1923 and led by the British was the best-equipped and the most forceful one in the entire Middle East. When Jordan gained its independence from Great Britain in 1946, Abdullah became the king of his masterpiece.

The creation of Israel in 1948 caused a prolonged problem for the country: the mass-influx of Palestinian refugees during the 1st Arab–Israeli War threatened the mainly tribal structure of the state. The annexation of the West Bank by Abdullah in 1950 fulfilled his dream to solve the Palestinian question by incorporating the territory into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This unofficial collaboration with Israel and the territorial aspirations of the King exacerbated vehemently the stateless Palestinian population, which resulted in the assassination of King Abdullah I (Brynen 1998). Palestinian refugees were granted citizenship in the Kingdom.

Abdullah's son, Talal, took over the throne in 1951, but his mental illness worsened during these years. Finally, Talal abdicated in favour of his son, Hussein, in 1952. The only reminder of Talal's reign is the frequently amended

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constitution of 1952, which has been the legal basis of the Kingdom to our day. Article 30 of the constitution stipulates that: “The King is the Head of the State and is immune from any liability and responsibility” (Constitution of Jordan 6). The King has the right to dissolve Parliament, he is the leader of the armed forces, he ratifies laws, and he declares war, among other powers. These privileges of the Hashemite dynasty are clearly contradicted by Article 24: “The Nation is the source of all powers”.

According to the Constitution, legislative power is in the hands of the National Assembly, which consists of two parts: the appointed Senate and the elected Lower House (or Chamber of Deputies, *majlis al-nuwwab*). During the 1950s general elections were held in 1950, 1951, 1954 and 1956 respectively, all of which showed an enormous political support for secular, leftist parties with strong ties to the West Bank. At that time the Arab World was under the influence of radical Arab nationalism or Panarabism, which questioned the legitimacy of the Hashemite dynasty. The Islamist Muslim Brotherhood³ won 8.3% of the votes in the 1956 election, and the more radical *Hizb al-Tahrir* – banned by the regime – boycotted the political process entirely (Lust-Okar 2001). In reality, the authority of King Hussein rested on the support of the southern tribal areas, while the Palestinians in the north were in favour of the revolutionary movements: *Ba'ath* Party, Communist Party, etc. The loyalist National Socialist Party led by Sulayman al-Nabulsi emerged as the most popular political party in the elections of 1954 and 1956.⁴

The newly appointed prime minister, al-Nabulsi challenged the Western-oriented foreign policy of King Hussein and oriented his policies toward the communist China and the Soviet Union. As a political coup against the monarchy was highly expected by the King, he dismissed the Nabulsi-government and imposed martial law in April 1957. When political parties were banned and political freedoms were restricted, the quasi-liberal regime collapsed. The state security institutions (*mukhaberat*) controlled the entire political landscape in the Kingdom for more than three decades (Robins 2004: 99–102). The only legal political organisation at that time was the Muslim Brotherhood, registered not as a political party, but as a charitable institution. The Brotherhood opposed the leftist parties and expressed its loyalty to the regime (see in depth Moaddel 2002).

In 1989, after street riots in major cities, the King launched a defensive political liberalisation programme resulting in the freest and fairest election since 1967. The political liberalisation strategy of the monarchy can be explained by four factors (Singh 2002; Brynen 1998: 80–83). The first stresses the immediate consequence of the bread riot of April 1989, when not only the Palestinian population, but also the loyalist East Bankers, the tribal stronghold of the monarchy, rose against the unpopular neo-liberal economic reforms required by the International

Monetary Fund. The second is the so-called *rentier* paradigm which takes into consideration the steady decline in foreign workers' remittances and foreign aid. The third argument emphasises the human agency paradigm, namely that the political liberalisation initiated by Hussein was a tactical decision in order to facilitate the survival of the regime. The fourth is the huge external influences on Jordan's internal politics underlined by Ali Kassay (2002). In 1989 the Cold War era's external alliance system of the kingdom was collapsing due to changes in the international system. The demonstrated effect of the democratisation process in Eastern Europe convinced the regime of the benefits of political and economic reforms.

In 1990 King Hussein enforced a national consensus on the limits of political freedoms, which was manifested in the acceptance of the *National Charter*. The Charter defines the boundaries of political reforms, stating that: "all parties shall rely on local, recognized, declared and specified Jordanian resources" (National Charter 1990). Also, the mass-media must observe the principle of "national responsibility"; namely, journalists are required to accept the red lines or taboos laid down by the regime (e.g.: the royal family must be excused from any criticism). In July 1991 martial law was lifted, in 1992 political parties were legalised, and in 1993 the King changed the election law from a multiple vote system to a "one man, one vote" system in favour of his political supporters (under-populated tribal areas). Although Jordan signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1994, the bilateral relations between the countries remained cold (George 2005: 36–37).

When on 7 February 1999 King Hussein died, the Crown Prince, Abdullah II, inherited the throne from his father. Just days before his death, King Hussein revised his decision on succession and took the title of Crown Prince from his brother, Hassan bin Talal and handed over to the politically inexperienced Abdullah. Abdullah II tried to build upon the political legacy of late King Hussein; however, he faced serious external and internal challenges at home, which severely affected the Jordanian political milieu.

3. THE GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is extremely influenced by its neighbourhood and by international issues. The uprising of the Palestinians in 2000, the war on terrorism, the Iraq war in 2003 etc., in some degree have had an impact on Jordan's internal stability.

The Palestinian population of the Hashemite Kingdom became more disenchanted after the outbreak of the second *intifada* in September 2000. According to the Foreign Ministry, Jordan hosts 41% of the Palestinian refugees (1.57 million

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Palestinian refugee registered with UNRWA), and 90% of displaced persons, who mostly integrated into Jordanian society (FMJ 2007a). Consequently, more than half of the total population of Jordan (approximately 5.9 million) is of Palestinian origin (CIA 2007).

The private sector of the Jordanian economy is dominated by Palestinians, as shown by Yitzhak Reiter (2004) in his research. The privatisation of state companies – which are controlled by Jordanians – has been slowed down, because of growing fears about privatised firms coming into the hands of the Palestinians. The main dilemma for the Hashemite dynasty is to decide whether the Palestinians will support the *status quo*, *vis-à-vis* the regime or will challenge the legitimacy of the current system by using their economic assets. Most wealthy Palestinian businessmen view themselves as Jordanian, that is to say, if a Palestinian state is established, they will remain in Jordan.

While the political sphere is completely the domain of Jordanians themselves, the Palestinians try to convert their economic power into political capital. In the present Upper House of the Parliament (Senate), only 7 Palestinians out of 55 senators were appointed by the King, and in the popularly elected Lower House they are also under-represented (Choucair 2006: 6). The frequently amended election law favours the rural and tribal areas, while the more urbanised and mainly Palestinian northern areas are underrepresented in the electoral system, because Palestinians are generally uninterested in internal politics, most of them do not participate in elections at all.

Not only has the manipulation of the voting system made Palestinians cautious about participating in domestic politics, but also their fear of ‘dual loyalty’ vested both in the Kingdom and in an independent Palestine. As long as they view themselves as Palestinians – whether wealthy or not – one of their main emotional goals is the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. Some experts even argue that if a Palestinian state comes into existence, commercial ties will be restored between both sides of the river Jordan resulting in growing migration. The standard of living in the West Bank was 15% higher in the *pre-intifada* period caused by the proximity of the business-oriented Israeli economy (Glein 2003). According to this view, the highly dependent Jordanian economy would collapse easily in the shadow of an independent Palestine.

The aggressive Israeli reactions against Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from September 2000 caused a security dilemma for the Hashemite regime. The widespread support for the Islamist *Hamas* has been growing in Jordan since the Oslo Accord, which is manifested in frequently organised street demonstrations. In August 1999 Abdullah chose to shut down the office of *Hamas* in Amman, and expelled three of its leaders. The decision of the King was part of a political manoeuvre planned to win foreign support for Jordan to preserve the po-

litical *status quo*. However, Abdullah miscalculated by forgetting the domestic audience, which was disenchanted by his foreign policy. The anger of Palestinians enlarged the political base of Jordan's most popular party, the Islamic Action Front, which benefited from the end of the peace process. The monarch issued a one-year ban on public demonstrations in October 2000, in spite of his promise to accelerate the political liberalisation process (Greenwood 2003).

The war on terrorism and the war against Iraq have had further consequences on domestic security, and have resulted in the postponement of political reforms. A few days before the war erupted in Iraq, Abdullah faced the same dilemma his father faced in 1991. If the monarch chose to meet the requirements of his domestic supporters he would lose the confidence of the West. Abdullah's Jordan walked the tightrope and condemned the intervention to silence the opposition in the Kingdom; while on the other hand, the King officially formed an alliance with President Bush's war on terrorism. The Kingdom has been cooperating with American Special Forces near the Iraqi border since 2003 to contain the influx of terrorist cells, which is often denied by the Jordanian Government. In May 2003 the United States approved a 1.1 billion USD economic and military emergency aid programme to help Jordan in overcoming the serious impact of the Iraqi crises (George 2005: 73). Jordan has also received a Patriot anti-missile system from the United States to prevent the escalation of the conflict and to strengthen the security of the US allies, Jordan and Israel.

The mass influx of Iraqi refugees from March 2003 also made the Kingdom vulnerable. Jordan hosts more than one million Iraqi refugees, who mainly settled in and around Amman. The Iraqi uprising had its immediate consequences on the security of Jordan: the suicide attack on 9 November 2005 demonstrated the existence of illegitimate Iraqi armed groups in the country headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi.⁵ The regime responded with an illiberal counter-terrorism law, which enlarged the powers of the security services. It is greatly feared in Jordan that the infiltration of terrorist groups will subvert the societal harmony of the Kingdom.

Human Rights Watch speaks of the "silent treatment" of Iraqi refugees in Jordan:

Because of Jordan's "silent treatment", most Iraqis in Jordan live a life at the margin of society, without proper legal status, unable to work legally, and unable to access subsidized social services such as education, health care, and housing (HRW 2006: 50).

When looking at the other side of the coin, it could be argued that the influx of Iraqi refugees has not only negatively affected the country. The mostly middle-, and upper-middle-class, well-educated Iraqi refugees fled in the Kingdom generated an investment boom in a thriving economy. This is the logic of the so-called

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‘peace dividend’: Jordan as a moderate and secure state benefited significantly from the fate of its neighbours. However, the security dilemma and the economic rents further delayed the political liberalisation process. Many average Jordanians are worried not only about the security situation of their country, but they also complain about high inflation rates, a decreasing living standard, and growing unemployment, all caused by Iraqi refugees who are blamed as scapegoats.

The *Hamas* victory in the Palestinian national elections held in March 2006 caused growing fears in Amman of an Islamist takeover of the Hashemite dynasty. Officially, King Abdullah labelled the elections as democratic, and he raised his voice against any interference into the internal affairs of the country (Halevi 2006). *Hamas* maintains close ties with the main Jordanian Islamist organisation, Islamist Action Front (IAF). Zaki Bin Arsheed, a politician close to *Hamas*, has been elected in March 2006 as the secretary general of the party. The outcome of the Palestinian elections affected political harmony between Islamists and the regime: specifically the MPs of IAF called for further political liberalisation and the adoption of a new election law with equal opportunities for all political parties.

The Lebanon war in 2006 also had destructive effects on the security perception of the Kingdom. King Abdullah warned the international community to balance the powerful Shiite-crescent formulated by Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon fearing the emerging political influence of Iran. Instead of the Islamist model promulgated by Iran, King Abdullah stresses the importance of the “Jordan model”: co-existence with moderate Islamists, a guided political liberalisation from above, the priority for economic reforms, and a Western-oriented foreign policy (Robert 2005). As Jordan is a tiny country in a strategic geopolitical location, these external factors, the Palestinian question, the Iraq war, and the Lebanon war each affected political and personal freedoms in the Jordanian society negatively.

4. THE DOMESTIC SCENE: THE JORDAN FIRST CAMPAIGN

The influence of the above-mentioned external factors is highly exaggerated by Jordan’s ruling elite in order to maintain the political *status quo*, which resulted in the postponement of political reforms. When pointing to war on terrorism, and the Palestinian question as subversive factors in a mainly tribal society, Jordan cannot see itself as the sole victim in the Middle East. Both the international community and the Hashemite dynasty have had a common interest since 9/11 in prolonging political liberalisation, because both are worried about the participation of Islamists in the poll.

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In 2001 the mandate of the Parliament expired and according to the Constitution new elections should be held within 4 months after the dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies. The King has the right to prolong the term of the existing Parliament by a maximum of two years with the issuance of a royal decree. However, on 24 July 2001 King Abdullah announced his decision on the dissolution of the Parliament and he indefinitely delayed general elections scheduled for November. The two year absence of the Parliament from Jordan's political life has been the beginning of a series of reversals in political liberalisation. As Curtis R. Ryan and Jillian Schwedler (2004) noted: "The regime passed some 250 temporary and emergency laws (many reining in liberalization still further), more than it had from independence in 1946 until 2001." The amendment of the penal code also narrowed political liberties and treated journalists as puppets of the regime.

Under these circumstances King Abdullah convened a royal commission to draft a document on the vision of Jordan's further development. The assumption of the government was that this new 'working plan' would strengthen national cohesion and would mobilise the population in order to achieve a national consensus on fundamental issues. One among the ten concepts of *The Jordan First (Al-Urdun Awalan)* campaign was the following:

"Jordan First is a melting pot that fortifies the national fabric for all Jordanian men and women and respects the diversity of their propensities, origins, attitudes, races and feelings. It seeks to integrate them nationally and socially in such a manner as to utilize our Jordanian pluralism as a source of strength for a modern, coherent civil society that prospers in climates of freedom, parliamentary democracy, supremacy of the Law, social justice, and equal opportunities" (FMJ 2007b).

After launching the campaign in October 2002, badges were worn by many Jordanians, and the national flag with the motto of the campaign was often displayed on houses and government buildings. The aim of *Al-Urdun Awalan* was to shift attention from international issues to internal development: economic issues emerged as the main topic of public debates. However, national emotions cooled when clashes broke out in the southern town of *Ma'an* between police forces and local Islamists.

The upheaval in *Ma'an* was the fourth eruption of armed clashes from the beginning of political liberalisation in 1989 until today.⁶ On 28 October 2002 militant Islamists assassinated Laurence Foley, an American citizen employed by USAID in Amman. One day later, police forces tried to question a local Islamist, Mohammad Shalabi, but he refused to help in finding the wrongdoers, which marked the outbreak of unrest (ICG 2003: 2). According to official sources the aim of the police initiative was to eliminate the unlawful local militants headed by Shalabi. However, an alternative argument can be mentioned, the economic and political marginalisation of the southern region, which was supposed to be the

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main stronghold of the Hashemite dynasty. The *Ma'an*'s riots affirmed the opinion of the ruling elite about the postponement of general elections in 2002, in spite of heavy criticism from the international community.

5. DEBATE OVER THE ELECTION LAW

At the time of the war against Iraq, Jordan witnessed serious public demonstrations against the US-led coalition, which strengthened the position of Islamists. King Abdullah II had chosen to join in the war against terrorism, which ousted the Saddam regime from power. The emotional outcry of the population reinforced the authority of the *mukhaberat* (security institutions), which meant that civil persons could be convicted of charges of terrorism at the State Security Court (*ibid.*: 5). Finally, King Abdullah decided to hold elections in June 2003, though the regional environment was disadvantageous for a political opening.

The official reason for the two years delay of elections was the amendment of the election law, which is one of the main tools for manipulating the outcome of ballots in Jordan. The election law in force was drafted in 1993, just months before the elections to marginalise the vociferous critics of the regime, the Islamic Action Front, which dominated the legislature from 1989 until 1993. The 1993 election law was based on the “one man, one vote system”, whereby eligible citizens can cast only one vote per district. The authorities changed the size of voting districts in favour of tribal areas, thereby playing on personal relations and loyalties. The voting system evidently placed parties at the margin of political life appealing to the neo-patriarchal arrangement of the state (Sharabi 1988). The mainly Palestinian population of Amman is under-represented under the aegis of the new law. As one commentator in the Lebanese *The Daily Star* cites the Democracy Reporting International:

... at its most extreme, there are nine times as many voters per parliamentary seat in Amman's second district as there are in the sixth district of Karak. The result is that although the two governorates of Amman and Irbid hold 57 percent of Jordan's voting population, they have only 38 percent of the parliamentary seats (Debartolo 2007).

King Abdullah II announced changes in the election law in 2002, which raised the number of deputies from 80 to 104, introduced a six-seat quota for women, and augmented the number of electoral districts from 21 to 45 (Fathi 2005; Hourani et al. 2004: 33).

The elections held in June 2003 witnessed the return of the Islamic Action Front to electoral politics after boycotting participatory politics in 1997, in spite of its heavy criticism of the regime. Contrary to all expectations, the Islamic Action Front performed poorly, winning only 17 parliamentary seats, notwithstanding

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the fact that the outbreak of the war against Iraq enlarged its support base. Also 5 independent Islamists, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, won seats in the Chamber of Deputies (Ryan – Schwedler 2004: 146). The results of the 2003 elections did not challenge the *status quo*: independent tribal leaders dominate the 14th Parliament. Jordanians of Palestinian origin are under-represented in the new legislation. They acquired only between 17 and 25 seats, which prove the imbalances in voter districts (Parker 2004: 156). Comparing Amman 1st district where Khalil Attiyah won a seat with 19,256 votes to *Tafileh* 2nd district, where only 365 votes were needed to become a representative, shows clearly the advantageous position of rural tribal areas. Voter rigging, double voting, and other manipulation techniques were widely reported on the polling day (Hourani et al. 2004: 192–194).

The number of candidates representing political parties was low, compared with former elections: only 10% belonged to a political party. Only ten parties and movements participated in elections; half of them acquired seats in the Parliament, the other half remained outside of parliamentary life (*ibid.*: 43). On 22 July 2003 Abu al-Ragheb formed his government, which was approved by the Chamber of Deputies in a vote of confidence. The June 2003 elections reinforced the characterisation of Jordan by experts as a *risk-free democracy*, where the political elite defines the rules of the game in order to prolong the life of the regime.

A few months after the national election, King Abdullah II established the Ministry of Political Development in order to advertise the Kingdom as the most advanced country in the region in terms of political reforms. The strategic planning director to the Ministry, Ali Bibi, defined political development as:

... a modernization process that will develop the relationship between the State and society, which will foster public stability and social peace through developing the law regulating public affairs, stimulating public participation, restructuring the public concepts of organizational and institutional structures and transforming the concepts of adjustment loyalty, transparency, accountability and participation from the theoretical stage into the application sphere (Bibi 2007).

Stability and peace are the two keywords in this speech, which led us to the debate of economic reform *versus* political liberalisation.

6. IS JORDAN A DEVELOPMENTAL STATE?

The political evolution of Jordan can easily fit into the ‘bread before freedom’ theory, in which a strong leader (Abdullah II) prefers economic reform over political opening. According to a poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan in 2004, 49% of the respondents believe that the Jordanian political system is a democratic system, while 12% stated that they live under an

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authoritarian government (CSS 2004: 4). The Center asked citizens about their aspirations and priorities in the same poll, and found that for 52% of the respondents, the most important issues facing their life are poverty and unemployment, while only 3.2% mentioned ‘enhancing democracy and freedom of expression’ as their most serious concern (*ibid.*: 9).

The majority of Jordanians are worrying about living standards, inflation, growing unemployment, and blame the government with corruption charges. King Abdullah and his population share a common vision of the future of Jordan: to prioritise economic reform over democracy. In 2000 Jordan became a member of the World Trade Organization and signed a free trade agreement with the United States in the same year. Jordan tries to attract foreign direct investment and create more employment possibilities through the US Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs) scheme, but it fails to achieve the goals. In 2003 more than 80% of QIZs workers were of South-East Asian origin (Choucair 2006: 15).

The appointment of Abu al-Ragheb as prime minister by King Abdullah in July 2003 reflects his commitment to economic development. The King surrounded himself with liberal–technocrat politicians convinced by the priority of neo-liberal economic policy (Ryan 2002: 117). The data collected in the latest *Jordan Human Development Report 2004* on the surface underpins the developmental state paradigm:

Between 1997 and 2002, its [Jordan] Human Development Index (HDI) rose from 0.715 to 0.747 (on a scale of 0–1). This increase is primarily the result of improvements in the life expectancy and education components of the HDI. Jordan has also witnessed an improved score for the Human Poverty Index (HPI), down from 9.8% to 7.4% (on a scale of 100%–0%). A significant milestone is that 98.5% now have access to health services (UNDP 2004: 1).

One of the positive signs of modernisation in Jordan is its changes in demographic trends. A conference held in Amman, March 2007 confirmed the fact that the Kingdom’s birth rate declined from 7.4 in 1976 to 3.2 in 2004, and is expected to reach 2.0 by the year 2020 (*The Jordan Times*, 29 March 2007). The so-called demographic dividend, which is a shift in worker-dependent ratio, also contributed to the accelerating economic growth of the country. In 2004 and 2005 the rate of GDP growth was 7.7% and 7.2% respectively, which is attributed to the economic boom caused by the reconstruction of Iraq (ENPI: 7).

In spite of the upgrading of some macroeconomic indicators, the country’s most serious challenge is the growing inequalities in income distribution. According to international standards, Jordan started to eliminate subsidies, which affected negatively the economic well-being of the people. By 2007 Jordan eliminated fuel subsidies completely, which resulted in inflated fuel prices and a complaining population. As long as the state can afford to maintain its position as the

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main employer of the workforce in the Kingdom, the legitimacy of the Hashemite dynasty remains untouchable. Many experts argue that the chance for Jordan's further political liberalisation is high, because the regime has started to lose its support base recently (Kamrava 1998). Kamrava classified Jordan as a "civic-myth monarchy", which was not institutionalised in the same way as its neighbours in the Arabian Peninsula, that is to say, the popularity of the dynasty depends highly on economic prosperity.

Another issue facing the Kingdom is *wasta*⁷ or favouritism, which is deeply intertwined with the fabric of the primordial Jordanian society. *Wasta* exists in every sphere. It is interwoven into politics, and economic relations, although *wasta* principally is a cultural phenomenon based on family and tribal kinship. Family or tribal members, and even friends, require certain kinds of help finding a job or getting admitted to university programmes, or just simply organising a marriage. The foundation of the Jordanian society is not the individual as in the West, but the extended family with strong commitment to each member. The existence of *wasta* prevents successful democratisation, although it has also positive effects on societal harmony:

But *wasta* is not all bad. The *wasta* paradox includes a psychic haven amidst the chaos of social change, providing individuals a sense of belonging to a social entity that provides unconditional acceptance, and assistance to the novice in solving problems that are commonplace to someone more experienced. These functions are positive for the individual and for society (Cunningham – Sarayrah 1993: 191).

According to a survey conducted in 2000 by the Arab Archives Institute, 87% were in favour of eliminating *wasta*, which is in their view a kind of corruption, while 90% responded that they would use *wasta* whenever it is necessary to solve a problem (cited by George 2005: 70). King Abdullah II frequently condemns *wasta* as a form of corruption, and strengthened the Anti-Corruption Unit in order to prevent the use of public funds for personal objectives.

The government launched the *National Agenda* campaign in 2006 which was drafted by a Committee composed of civil society members, government and public sector representatives, fostering a "national inclusion" and defining developmental goals for the next ten years. The document stresses the priority of economic development, while it also recognises the importance of political reforms. One of the findings of the Committee is that "Jordan is one of the smallest and poorest economies in the Middle East". Thus the main goal of the agenda "is to improve the quality of life of Jordanians through the creation on income-generating opportunities, the improvement of standards of living, and the guarantee of social welfare" (National Agenda).

While the document uses the terms "political reform" and "political development" frequently, it seems that the importance of democracy was only marginal

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for the drafting Committee, which reinforces the developmental state vision of King Abdullah II. The main targets of the National Agenda are the following: achieving 7–8% real GDP growth per year by 2012, reducing the rate of unemployment from 14% to 6.8% by the year 2012, while preserving the political stability of the Kingdom. The document has laid down the fundamentals of the so-called Jordan model: to implement selective neo-liberal economic reforms (cutting subsidies, privatisation, and export-oriented development), while keeping an eye on public opinion in order not to lose the loyalty of people, and to launch gradual political reforms, which do not affect the *status quo*. This kind of rhetoric placed the image of the country at the front among Middle Eastern countries, which was acknowledged by the international community.

The EU Country Strategic Paper (2007–2013) praised the efforts of the Kingdom in introducing political changes. The Paper reinforced the perception of the Jordan model describing the Kingdom as “an important stabilizing and modernizing influence” and perceived it as “a valuable partner” in the modernisation of the region. The EU rewarded the Jordan model with an allocation of 265 million euros for the period 2007–2010 (ENPI: 3), which contributes to the conservation of the authoritarian political system. The Country Strategic Paper defined four strategic objectives: political reform and good governance, trade and investment development, sustainability of the development process, and institution building through financial stability.

The international community expressed its recognition of the commitment of the Kingdom to condemn religious extremism and terrorism. This policy is echoed with the *Amman Message* launched in November 2004 by King Abdullah II, whose goal was to promote a moderate form of Islam in the region and to win the loyalty of the religious opposition. The promulgation of the *Amman Message* coincided with the growing fear about the spillover of Iraq’s civil strife in Jordan, especially after the suicide attacks against Amman’s hotels in 2005.

7. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE MEDIA

The associational organisations played an important role under martial law from 1957 until Hussein’s 1989 initiative to launch political reforms in the country. While political parties were banned during this period, professional organisations remained vibrant and filled the political vacuum by revitalising political life. The Muslim Brothers – registered as a charitable NGO and not as a political party – was the only organisation, which could have a hidden political agenda in the country (Brand 1996).

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After the beginning of the new era in 1989 the civil society of the Kingdom began to emerge. According to the estimation of the *Al-Urdun al-Jadid Research Center* there are around 2000 NGOs in the country. Most of them are charitable and societal organisations without explicit political interest, while today not more than 35 political parties are registered with the Ministry (Kassim 2006: 9).

Many political science experts argue that the emerging civil society has a primary role in forwarding the democratisation process. Recent literature on Middle Eastern political development questions this argument by regarding the evolution of the civil society as a weakness of the political system. As Vickie Langohr (2005) argued, advocacy NGOs are the main secular opposition to the regime, which proves that political parties are generally underdeveloped. Advocacy NGOs, like human rights groups, women organisations are numerous in the Jordanian society, but quantitative development does not mean that positive and negative liberties are enlarging.

The tactic of “defensive democratisation” can be proven if we consider the evolution and the regulation of NGOs in Jordan. Between 1989 and 1994, the number of civil society organisations increased by 67%. Most of them enjoy relative independence from the government (Wiktorowicz 2002). Law 33, which is the legal basis for the establishment of NGOs, restricts their freedom of operation. Most of the above-mentioned advocacy groups are rooted outside the country. Usually they are Western-funded initiatives with little financial support from the society. Recently the regime became suspicious about the foreign funded political NGOs, characterising them as a source of “foreign infiltration” (Ryan 2002: 122). NGOs are required to send an annual report on their work, on the names of their members, and on their financial resources. Organisations that fail to prepare this report are often dissolved by the Ministry. It is forbidden for political civil society organisations to criticise the foreign policies of the government, such as the peace treaty with Israel, or the war against terrorism.

In 2002 the National Centre for Human Rights was established by the regime in order to strengthen the importance of human rights in the Kingdom. The nomination of Ahmad al-Obeidat, a former prime minister and a former director of the General Intelligence Department, for director of the National Centre shows that the ruling regime has an intention to control and guide the public debate on human rights issues (George 2005: 59). Essentially, the regime wants to preserve its right to define the rules of the game and to prevent further democratisation process, while showing a liberal image of the Hashemites to the international community. However, if we compare the balance of human rights in Jordan with other Arab countries in the region, the Hashemite Kingdom can be ranked 1st.

Political liberalisation, started in 1989, positively affected the media freedoms. New dailies and weeklies were launched and public debates on political questions

were allowed to flourish. In 1993 a new press law was adopted by the government, which replaced the old-fashioned law of 1973. However, internal and external political development during the 1990s culminated in the deterioration of media liberties, especially after the peace treaty was signed with Israel in 1994 (Ryan 2002: 120).

The Press and Publication Law approved by the Parliament in 1998 further tightened the opportunities of the media to criticise the regime. According to the new regulations introduced by the law, all daily newspapers are required to have at least JD 500,000, and for weeklies the law set JD 100,000 as a minimum. The intention of this amendment of previous laws is to reduce the number of newspapers to a number which can be easily monitored. Article 37 introduced harsh conditions for journalists criticising the royal family, the army, the security services, or friendly Arab states. Endangering the national unity of the Kingdom is also punishable (Lucas 2000: 189).

In 2002, the Amman office of the Qatari-based television, *Al-Jazeera*, was shut down for months after a talk show offending the royal family was broadcast. Self-censorship is generally practiced by journalists to avoid punishment or the intervention of security agencies. The main English-language daily, *The Jordan Times*, owned partly by a government-controlled agency, is more liberal than its Arabic counterparts to create a reform-minded image of the regime for the outside world. Harassment of journalists and interference in the publication of articles are not uncommon in Jordan. King Abdullah II replaced the information ministry with an independent Higher Media Council in 2002 whose members were appointed by the regime. The role of the Council is still unclarified, inducing debates among journalists (George 2005: 207–222).

8. FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE 2007 YEAR'S ELECTION

As elections are forthcoming at the end of this year, public attention has turned toward the new political parties law, which is threatening the existence of several political organisations. The controversial law was passed in March 2007 before the dissolution of the ordinary session of the Parliament. The law raises the required number of funding members from a minimum of 50 to 500, and sets a minimum representation of 10% from at least five governorates for parties. If a party fails to meet the new regulation, it will be disbanded (*The Jordan Times*, 12 April 2007). Most of the existing political parties are incapable of fulfilling these requirements, except the Islamic Action Front, the best organised party of the country. Around 30 opposition and pro-government political parties, including the Is-

Islamic Action Front, joined in boycotting the law, which will enter into effect after this year's elections.

King Abdullah II has explicitly declared several times that in his vision existing political parties will be merged into three political currents, leftist, conservative, and Islamist, ending the over-fragmented political structure. Political party members are getting frightened by the fact that the Islamic Action Front has the strongest base in the Kingdom: "if the IAF becomes the only opposition party, some fear the next step would be to abolish political parties altogether" – noted a commentator of *The Daily Star* (27 April 2007).

Political parties have claimed that the new law contradicts the Constitution, which allows establishing political parties freely. Islamic Action Front first boycotted the extraordinary session of the Parliament convened in April, but later decided to participate. Munir Hamarneh, the speaker for the Higher Committee for Coordination among opposition parties said that this "legislation turns the country's political life 10 years back and violates the people's constitutional rights" (*The Star*, 3–9 May 2007). Although the Interior Ministry has denied the authorisation for a sit-in against the law, political parties are committed to hold rallies.

A controversial new municipal law was passed by the Parliament in February 2007 that introduces a new scheme for appointing mayors and half of the council members by the government, a sign of de-liberalisation. The new law introduced a 20% quota for women, and reduced the minimum age of eligible voters from 19 to 18. Before the municipal election at the end of July 2007, authorities have arrested five members of the Islamic Action Front Party in the city of Zarqa during a "security operation to hunt a terror group" (*The Jordan Times*, 12 June 2007).

Nevertheless, the future prospect for enlarging democratic freedoms in Jordan is not only negative, but also shows some positive trends. A survey carried out in March by the Jordan Centre for Social Research showed that 72.5% of the respondents would participate in parliamentary elections, while 23.5% would stay away from politics. This survey indicated also that the majority (55.7%) of the population is satisfied with the existing 'one man, one vote' election system, a fact which surprised many politicians (JCSR 2007). We can agree with the opinion of the EU Country Strategic Paper: "Jordan is perceived as one of the most advanced countries in the region on terms of political reform, though it has yet to produce a fully representative and democratic system" (ENPI: 5).

NOTES

- ¹ According to the report of the Freedom House only Israel and Turkey can be typified as electoral democracies. However, neither are part of the Arab World. See Freedom House (2006).
- ² The most conservative Middle Eastern country in terms of political liberalisation is Saudi Arabia. However even in Saudi Arabia political reforms occurred in the last ten years.
- ³ The Muslim Brotherhood was established in Egypt in 1928. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood is a subsidiary of its Egyptian parent organisation. The goal of the Muslim Brotherhood is to replace secular governments in the Middle East with Islamic political systems based on the *shari'a*. The organisation is a moderate conservative Islamic movement in Jordan rejecting armed struggle as a tool. Its political wing – called Islamic Action Front – is a legalised political party in Jordan participating in electoral politics.
- ⁴ It is must noted that political parties were weak and marginalised, and mainly independent candidates (namely loyalist tribal leaders) won seats in these elections.
- ⁵ Many Jordanians share the conviction that Jordan will not be able to avoid the impacts of the security situation in Iraq. The suicide bombings against Amman's 5-star hotels in 2005 were the first step toward a worsening security prospect.
- ⁶ The town of *Ma'an* lies in the southern part of the Kingdom, where tribalism is the dominant force of society. From the foundation of the Kingdom, Ma'an is a stronghold of the Hashemites.
- ⁷ Some Western scholars translate *wasta* as a kind of corruption, but this definition obscures the fact that *wasta* is not mainly a political or economic phenomenon, rather it has strong root in culture.

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