

Jordan Bracing for Protests

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Brief Analysis

The imminent rallies could test both the opposition's strength and the palace's willingness to tolerate dissent.

Tomorrow, a loose coalition of Jordan's Islamist and tribal opposition factions will hold a demonstration in downtown Amman to demand faster and deeper political and economic reform. The movement's leaders predict that 50,000 protestors will take part. Their "Inkath al-Watan ("Save the Homeland") march will be countered by an "initiative of gratitude" to the king, a pro-monarchy rally titled "Ihna Maak" ("We Are with You"). It is unclear whether the Friday demonstrations -- which promise to be the largest outpouring in the kingdom since the start of the region-wide Arab uprisings -- will lead to violence. The opposition turnout and the palace's handling of the protestors may provide some indication of Jordan's trajectory.

Although the kingdom has proven relatively stable over the past two years, it has not been completely immune to the regional turbulence. Since the start of the revolt in Tunisia, Jordan's traditional Islamist opposition -- led by the Muslim Brotherhood -- has been protesting against corruption and economic privation. It has also called for changes in the electoral law that would lead to greater representation in parliament and, eventually, transform Jordan into a constitutional monarchy. More recently, however, the Islamists have been joined by disaffected tribal elements known as al-Hirak ("The Movement"), a disparate group of younger East Bankers largely focused on high-level corruption, but also supportive of political change.

The emergence of the Hirak is significant because East Bank tribes have long been considered the strongest supporters of the king and the Hashemite monarchy in a country whose ethnic majority is widely believed to be Palestinian. Early Hirak-led protests throughout Jordan attracted hundreds of participants, but the numbers have dropped due to a combination of fatigue and repression (nearly two dozen Hirak leaders are currently under arrest and awaiting trial in state security court). Many of the initial protests were brazen in their criticism of the palace, violating laws prohibiting defamation of the king and his family. Most famously, demonstrators in Tafilah province

and the Tafilah neighborhood of Amman -- both areas known for their loyalty to the king -- have been using the Dabka al-Fasad, a traditional local dance that has been creatively augmented with protest chants targeting perceived corruption in the royal family. Earlier this week, after the arrest of yet another Hirak activist, protestors gathered outside the palace gates to dance the Dabka.

The Hirak and the Islamists will be joined at Friday's rally by journalists -- many affiliated with electronic media outlets -- protesting the kingdom's new press and publications law. Among other things, the law mandates that Jordanian internet publications register for a license within eighty days or risk being blocked. More than fifty-five such publications have already said they will not register.

The government has responded to previous protests by pursuing a number of high-profile corruption cases. Yet the opposition maintains that the most egregious cases of graft -- involving former and current senior officials and, allegedly, members of the royal family -- have either not been investigated or remain closed to public scrutiny under parliamentary supervision. Meanwhile, the palace is resisting demands for electoral changes that would significantly alter the composition of the legislature. This week, Amman announced a fifteen-day extension for voter registration, but only 2 million or so of the country's 3.7 million eligible citizens are likely to sign up. Accordingly, if turnout for the December parliamentary elections unfolds as projected (one recent poll estimated that 56 percent of registrants would actually vote), then less than 30 percent of Jordan's eligible voters would have a say in selecting the next legislature.

Even so, while the protest movement has generated a great deal of heat, its ultimate impact on the kingdom remains to be seen. The Islamists remain the strongest and most coherent element of the opposition, but they appear to lack widespread local appeal, while the Hirak have yet to develop a unified message and leadership. Moreover, Palestinian Jordanians -- the largest segment of the population and, arguably, the one with the most to gain from electoral reform -- remain notably absent from the demonstrations. Still, around eighty different groups are slated to participate in tomorrow's protest, suggesting unprecedented diversity (if not numerical strength) among the opposition.

For its part, the palace could attempt to block roads into Amman in order to decrease turnout. In a front-page story in Monday's edition of the government daily *al-Rai*, an unnamed official stated that security forces would not deploy on Friday out of "fear" that they would "stand with one side against the other" -- a sentiment seemingly intended to dissuade opposition participation. Yet the Public Security Directorate has since announced that it would not forsake its "sacred duty to protect" Jordanian citizens. To be sure, if security is mishandled tomorrow, it could strengthen what now appears to be a small but persistent opposition. While the hype behind the demonstrations may turn out to be just that, the rallies could still turn into a test of both the opposition's strength and the palace's willingness to tolerate dissent.

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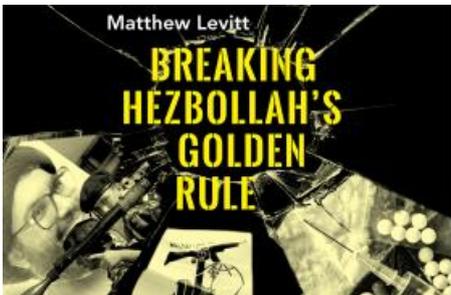
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