

Jordan's Evolving Strategy toward the Pressures of the Arab Spring

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Brief Analysis

Although Jordan's new prime minister seems ready to address the public outcry over corruption, he may run into the same bureaucratic and economic impediments that have stymied previous governments.

Last month, King Abdullah of Jordan dismissed his second prime minister since the onset of the Arab Spring earlier this year. The decision to remove Marouf Bakhit was part of the king's strategy to placate an increasingly restive population's demands for political reform and an end to endemic and conspicuous corruption. Notwithstanding the opposition of ruling elites, who believe dramatic reforms could diminish their traditional perquisites, King Abdullah appears to understand that his legitimacy now rests in large part on his ability to respond to longstanding demands from the street.

Bakhit's replacement is Awn Khasawneh, a professional judge who previously served as chief of Jordan's Royal Court, vice president of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and a leading figure in the king's constitutional reform project (for more on this project, see [PolicyWatch #1855 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3405\)](#)). His appointment may help Amman stabilize the kingdom against the political and social tempest sweeping the region.

A Trust Deficit

When King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 2000, economics supplanted regional politics as Jordan's chief priority. Upon taking power, he initiated a program of liberal economic reforms, including privatization and

subsidy reductions. But the initiative has been coupled with eye-catching corruption, and much of the population has consequently soured on the effort. High-profile corruption scandals have dominated the local press over the past few years, including private sales of government lands engineered by the Royal Court, illegal government efforts to establish a foreign casino in the kingdom, and the decision to allow Khaled Shahin -- a tycoon jailed on corruption charges -- to go abroad for medical treatment and only return after popular pressures forced the government's hand.

Complicating matters for the king, Transjordanians -- the so-called "East Bankers" who had traditionally been the palace's leading supporters -- were hit hardest by the new economic policies. And the personalities most identified with these policies were Jordanians of Palestinian origin, which only exacerbated East Banker concerns. Not surprisingly, Transjordanians now constitute the core of the kingdom's protest movement. Indeed, according to recent polls, this constituency feels more alienated than ever from the government's decisionmaking process.

Resentment has also been growing among Jordanians of Palestinian origin in recent years, thanks in large part to the dominant impression of pervasive corruption. The problem is so severe that many Jordanians name fighting corruption as their top priority. And it is widely understood that fixing the regime is a prerequisite for clean governance.

In his representations to the West, King Abdullah has traditionally focused on his subjects' economic rather than political grievances. According to Basel al-Okour, co-publisher of the highly credible Jordanian news portal AmmonNews, "The state promote[d] this kind of misperception to distract the attention of the international community from the people's real desire concerning the trust gap between state and society." For example, in addition to pursuing unpopular economic policies, the king dissolved parliament from 2001 to 2003, downgraded its role thereafter, and conducted elections in 2007 that were widely seen as fraudulent. Once the Arab Spring began, however, it was no longer tenable for the palace to relegate political reform to second-tier status.

Against this backdrop, King Abdullah chose the untainted, relatively low-profile Khasawneh as his next prime minister. Not only has Khasawneh never been linked to corruption, he is a well-known international jurist who understands that his task is to restore public trust in governance. As the king said in his October 17 letter of designation to the new minister, "Political reform characterizes the current phase in the journey of our beloved Jordan."

Changes at the GID

In tandem with the change of government, King Abdullah also announced that Maj. Gen. Faisal Shobaki would replace Lt. Gen. Muhammad Raqqad as head of the General Intelligence Directorate -- an agency that has come under fire for its opposition to reform and perceived interference in politics. As the king wrote in his open letter of appointment to Shobaki, "Your leadership at the GID comes as part of our efforts to translate our comprehensive reform vision. This requires that you direct this glorious institution towards supporting the reform process, by employing new tools and approaches...in full respect of the institutional and legal frameworks, human rights and freedoms." The expectation in Jordan is that the new partnership between Khasawneh and Shobaki will focus on rooting out institutional corruption.

Requirements for Success

Strengthening traditionally impotent parts of the government will be a key element in the kingdom's political reform efforts. Under Abdullah, the balance has been skewed even more in favor of the Royal Court and GID, two bodies that answer directly to him. This has rendered previous cabinets powerless. Reform advocates have been pressing for a stronger government, and most factions -- including the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- welcomed Bakhit's dismissal and Khasawneh's appointment.

Given the high expectations, the new prime minister's honeymoon period will likely be short. It should be possible to

assess rather quickly -- perhaps as soon as his cabinet choices are announced -- whether Khasawneh is determined to establish himself as an independent center of power in the kingdom. According to Samir al-Hiyari, chairman of the board for *al-Rai* newspaper, Khasawneh's success will be linked to three points: "the formation of the government; the ability of the government to fight corruption; and...safeguarding the liberties and dignity of citizens." Should his government fail to meet popular expectations on these issues, protestors will soon array against him as well.

Another target of the emerging pro-reform lobby is the electoral law, a long-sensitive issue that rests on the kingdom's demographic balance between East Bankers and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. In an October 20 op-ed in the Jordanian daily *al-Arab al-Yawm*, leading IAF official Irhail al-Gharaibah suggested that a new electoral law aimed at ensuring public participation in governance may be the only way out of the current crisis.

Of course, the economy continues to be a major challenge as well. Although the kingdom may soon receive a potentially significant cash infusion from the Gulf Cooperation Council, many Jordanian economists point to systemic problems, insisting that the king's advisors and successive governments have mismanaged the economy over the past decade. Of particular concern are the perennial budget deficits that have contributed to debt that currently exceeds 60 percent of gross national product. In terms of perception, however, the economic crisis is widely believed to be yet another product of the public's top concern, corruption.

Conclusion

If Jordan is to defuse the ongoing domestic tension, political reform is a must. Fortunately, King Abdullah seems to understand that the political status quo is untenable. He has already overseen a constitutional reform process that 74 percent of Jordanians viewed as a positive step, according to the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies. And the new prime minister, with his spotless reputation, has a unique opportunity to tackle endemic corruption. Khasawneh has pledged that his government will proceed "without delay" to remedy the problem, in part by working to protect judiciary independence. Yet it remains to be seen how he will overcome the bureaucratic and traditional impediments that stymied previous governments. If the new cabinet fails to deliver this time, the stability of the kingdom itself will be threatened.

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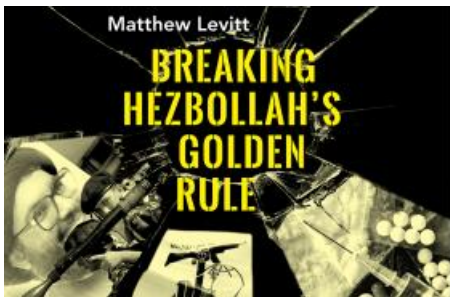
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