

Previewing Jordan's National Agenda: Strategies for Reform

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Brief Analysis

King Abdullah II's latest domestic reform initiative for Jordan -- the National Agenda Committee -- will soon release a series of major political recommendations. These proposals will provide the Jordanian government with a detailed framework to guide the reform process in coming years.

Background

The National Agenda initiative was launched in February 2005 after reasonably free and fair elections were held in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, Jordan's eastern and western neighbors. The fact that elections could proceed in such insecure and politically troubled areas raised both international and domestic pressure on the Jordanian regime to quicken its own pace of reform, especially given its relative security and stability. The idea of the National Agenda is to set guidelines, programs, and strategies to reform Jordan's political, educational, social welfare, and state financial systems over the next decade, outlining policies to which successive governments would be committed. Abdullah told a number of parliamentarians at a Royal Court meeting shortly after the launch of the program that "future laws to regulate political and social life will be based on the recommendations and guidelines of [the National Agenda's] subcommittees."

The National Agenda is being drafted by a twenty-six-member panel consisting of elite segments of Jordanian society, such as former ministers, loyal politicians, heads of tribes, academics, and businesspeople. All members hail from wealthy families that have had close ties with the palace and historically benefited from its loyalty to the regime. Abdullah's plan, evidently, is to strike a balance between the reform-oriented segments of the core elite and the conservative tribal and security apparatus, which is widely represented among the current parliament and has stymied other attempts at structural change. No technocrats, opposition figures, or middle class leaders are represented on the panel.

The committee, which was established by royal decree without parliamentary consultation or approval, has devised work plans for its subcommittees that address the eight aspects of its mission. These subcommittees are expected to produce not only general ideas for change but to offer specific suggestions for which government agencies should be directed to implement programs, timetables for implementation, and estimated costs of implementation. Despite the

secrecy surrounding its discussions, the panel's chairman, deputy prime minister Marwan Muasher, said earlier that the National Agenda, unlike previous nationwide reform schemes from Abdullah's first half-decade on the throne, "will avoid loose slogans and rhetoric to embrace down-to-earth, feasible solutions for problems impeding the kingdom's attempts to socioeconomic reform and democratization." After a nationwide address in August, during which the king showed his disgruntlement with the slow pace of reform by refusing to shake hands with ministers and parliamentarians in attendance, he insisted, "The National Agenda will lead the country into a new age where there is more press freedom, health insurance for all, an independent judiciary, a more politically active public, political pluralism, active and powerful parties with clear-cut platforms, and empowered women and youth."

Economic Growth Is Job One

At the top of the list of Jordan's challenges is economic growth. In order to boost domestic revenues, create more jobs and reach economic self-reliance, Jordan needs to achieve and maintain an annual growth rate of 9-10 percent over the next decade. Indeed, Muasher has warned that merely maintaining the existing relatively high 7 percent growth rate will produce nearly a 50 percent increase in the official rate of unemployment over the next ten years, from 14 percent to 20 percent.

With the support of two hundred experts, the panel members and its subcommittees have reportedly come up with an array of specific economic recommendations. They urge greater focus on small and medium-sized projects, which currently employ only a third of the workforce. By contrast, the report will point out, in advanced countries small- and medium-sized enterprises employ two-thirds of the workforce.

There are several longterm obstacles to achieving this level of growth. These include rising budget deficits. According to recent reports, the deficit will rise to \$600 million by the end of 2005, due to a 19.7 percent increase in government expenditures. The high current spending was attributed to a surge in fuel subsidies as a result of increased oil prices, as well as to high wages and officials' travel expenses. At the same time, foreign assistances dropped by 40 percent during the first seven months of 2005 compared to the same period the previous year. Despite all the grants and loans that floated the Jordanian economy, between 15 and 30 percent of Jordanians live below a poverty line of \$439 per capita. While large chunks of foreign aid flowed to huge infrastructure projects (e.g., water resource management, social sector development, and public-sector reform), little was directed to bolstering small and medium enterprises, which traditionally are the backbone of the Jordanian economy. In addition, a considerable slice of foreign aid went to finance the budget deficit, rather than supporting job-creating initiatives.

While Jordan has registered important good news in terms of the explosive growth in exports from the Qualifying Industrial Zones -- which were \$930 million in 2004 and are expected to reach nearly \$1.2 billion in 2005 -- many see little impact on Jordanians' standard of living. Many of these projects rely on highly skilled labor from East Asia instead of native Jordanians, while the manufacturing is based in remote areas where the benefits of local growth extend to relatively few people. Also, revenues from these exports are limited to a small circle of Jordanian businessmen who early on established contacts with Israeli counterparts before the eruption of current Palestinian intifada. Neither Jordanian officials nor the chamber of commerce have encouraged attempts to build more cooperative relations with Israelis. Moreover, very few entrepreneurs have reinvested the revenues of their textile business in the underprivileged areas surrounding the zones.

Key Components of Political Reform

The National Agenda Committee is expected to recommend comprehensive structural modifications to Jordan's current election law and political parties law, which previously hindered attempts at mass political participation. The longterm success of these initiatives is related to number of domestic indications:

An increased level of participation in political life. The vast majority of Jordanians play little role in the nation's

political life. With the exception of the Islamic Action Front party, Jordan's political parties were founded by the state bureaucratic elite. Some represented efforts to build parties of the regime, which would be used to strengthen existing state institutions under the guise of democracy. However, neither these parties nor leftist or Arab nationalist parties ever succeeded in attracting significant popular support. A new initiative that somehow triggers increased participation from the grassroots and inhabitants of high-density urban areas -- commonly called "the silent majority" -- would represent a major boost for the kingdom's political life before upcoming parliamentary elections.

Practical steps in strengthening free media and freedom of expression. Jordan's official news agency, Petra, currently holds a monopoly on official news and information emanating from the palace. The current press law places limits on journalistic investigation and reporting. Additionally, a 2005 poll by the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies revealed that the vast majority of Jordanians still fear retribution against themselves, their families, and their livelihoods should they offer any criticism of the government, let alone the monarchy. While the conservative old guard is still in control of the influential state mass media, an in-house debate about future editorial policies and existing practices of self-censorship would be a major step forward.

Amendments to the election law. While the king is expected to dissolve the current parliament, elected in 2003, and call for early elections, the system of elections is a major issue of concern. Many Jordanians do not like the current "single non-transferable vote" system, widely known as "one person, one vote." Some contend that the electoral districts are unfairly drawn and fail to provide representation in proportion to population. Others urge the return to a mixed electoral system, giving voters multiple representatives in parliament. This could mean the introduction of a two-tier system in which voters cast ballots for representatives for their territorial district as well as for a nationwide political party list.

Conclusion

Jordan still has a long way to go before it develops into a Moroccan-style constitutional monarchy, let alone one in the European mode. Nevertheless, it has adopted a substantial set of national reforms, especially in economic, legal, and administrative matters, and has embarked on a significant democratization process, particularly when viewed in the regional context. The National Agenda initiative appears to reflect a recognition that the regime needs to find a way to overcome opposition to further reform from among its traditional allies -- tribal elements and Islamists. The depth of the changes the National Agenda Committee proposes -- and the regime's persistence in carrying them out -- will determine whether Jordan continues down the path of hopeful reform or whether the forces of reaction succeed in stymieing further progress.

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