

A Reform Initiative in Jordan: Trying to Keep Pace with Iraqi and Palestinian Elections

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Brief Analysis

Jordan's King Abdullah recently announced a major initiative for decentralizing political and fiscal authority in the kingdom by establishing a number of regional assemblies and empowering them with many of the responsibilities currently enjoyed by the parliament and central government. This effort should be viewed as one of the means by which the Hashemite monarch hopes to keep pace with the democratizing trend in the Middle East, headlined by the success of recent elections on Jordan's east (Iraq) and west (West Bank/Gaza).

Background

For many years, Jordan has deservedly enjoyed a reputation as a standard-bearer of moderation and reform among Arab states. Education is highly prized, illiteracy rates are low, and political prisoners are few and rarely incarcerated for long. The late King Hussein reconstituted the parliament in the mid-1980s; despite an electoral system weighted in favor of "East Bankers" over "Jordanians of Palestinian origin" (as the local euphemism goes), Jordan has held relatively free elections ever since. Women have long held the right to vote and have exercised it in large numbers. In a region where reformers, democrats, and social mavericks routinely suffer imprisonment, torture, disappearance, or death, the long arm of the Jordanian state is normally limited to a stern warning, a lost job, or a confiscated passport.

In recent years, the kingdom has focused most of its national efforts on economic reform, including efforts to streamline business start-ups, encourage foreign investment, and reduce bureaucracy. The Qualifying Industrial Zones established in cooperation with Israel have been showcase initiatives, producing thousands of jobs and nearly \$1 billion worth of exports to the United States. The combined effect of these policies—complemented by a sizable infusion of cash from Iraqi expatriates, Syrian land speculators, Palestinians seeking a violence-free sanctuary for their capital, U.S. economic aid, and the derivative benefits of U.S. companies setting up shop in Jordan to service operations in Iraq—provided Jordan with an impressive 7 percent growth rate in 2004.

The push for economic reform that has characterized Abdullah's six years on the throne has not been matched, however, by a similar push toward expanded liberalization and democratization. This inertia is exemplified by the extended period during which the king has governed by issuing dozens of royal decrees rather than through the

parliamentary mechanisms of a constitutional monarchy. The regime explains this arrangement as a reaction to the barrenness of parliamentary life, in which ideological parties are weak, personality cliques are powerful, and a blocking coalition of Islamists and tribal conservatives regularly found common ground in opposing some of the government's more progressive reforms (e.g., against "honor killings"). All the while, Jordan's media environment has atrophied. Though Jordan once touted itself as a possible home for "free media" in the region, the kingdom's media is less robust, free-wheeling, and provocative than can be found in other modernizing monarchies such as Morocco.

A Move to Decentralize

In this context, the king delivered a brief nationwide address on January 26 announcing what was touted as major political and administrative reform. Specifically, he outlined a new approach to political participation in public life: "As political development is the gateway to the full participation of all segments of grassroots and civil society institutions in the various aspects of the development process, I assert here that political development should start at the grassroots level, then move up to decisionmaking centers, and not vice versa." Operationally, he said, the kingdom's current administrative divisions will be "reconsidered." The existing governorates—twelve in number, from Irbid in the north to Aqaba in the south—will be combined into a small number (three or four) of "development areas or regions." Each region will have a directly elected local assembly that, along with directly elected municipal councils, will "set priorities and draw up plans and programs related to their respective regions." He specifically noted that these new assemblies would enjoy the power of the purse, that is, making decisions over "public facilities, investment priorities, expenditures on capital and services projects, and in overseeing the performance of official bodies in all areas." In explaining the rationale for this whole exercise, he noted that "these tasks should no longer be exclusive to central decisionmakers because the people of each region are more aware of their interests and needs."

In practical terms, the king's plan is effectively a strategy to circumvent two sets of institutions: parliament and the central government ministries. Depending on how it is implemented, the king's proposal to transfer primary responsibility for many areas of planning, spending, and service delivery—possibly even in such politically explosive fields as education, health, and public works—from Amman to the regions could translate into a huge shift of influence over jobs and money from politicians and bureaucrats in the capital to local officials in the provinces.

Prospects for Change

Whether Jordan persists with a plan for grassroots empowerment remains to be seen. Here, the kingdom must navigate between two unpalatable outcomes. On the one hand, having promised real change, the regime's credibility is now at stake. This means rejecting a mere reshuffling of the deck chairs on the ship of state, a form-over-function change that would occupy the gossiping energies of the political class but leave little real reform in its wake. Jordan is a small country with an entrenched political elite; real political change cannot occur without stepping on some powerful toes. At the same time, the palace is unlikely to press forward with a scheme that could turn its most loyal supporters into aggrieved critics. Pursuing genuine decentralization that empowers local government will therefore be a challenge.

On the other hand, the regime must avoid unleashing so much decentralization that it disturbs the carefully nurtured process of national integration that has registered so much success in recent years, a process symbolized by Abdullah's "Jordan First" campaign. While Jordan has an overwhelmingly Sunni Arab population, differences in politics, culture, tribalism, and national origin can still run deep. The large Palestinian populations in some areas will be a major concern, but there are other important factors to watch, such as the unusually deep support for radical Islamists in Transjordanian strongholds like Salt and Maan.

Because the palace is the source of political support for the reform initiative, decentralization actually has the

potential to improve the lot of ordinary citizens, which itself would be a major achievement. The key determinants of success will be the details of legal and administrative implementation, including precise answers to such questions as who will control taxation, whether Amman or the provinces will determine spending priorities, and whether poorer regions will be able to count on extra aid from the central government to ensure adequate service delivery. Circumventing parliament will not by itself produce much for ordinary Jordanians and will be characterized by some as, at most, a lateral step for reform; redefining the relationship between the center and the provinces is the key.

So far, the king has moved ahead as promised with naming a blue-ribbon Royal Commission to define the specifics of implementing the decentralization plan. The twelve-member group includes three former prime ministers, and Deputy Prime Minister (and former foreign minister) Marwan Muasher has reportedly been tapped for the thankless task of coordinating the commission's work with what must be a wary government.

Regional Context

The real meaning of the king's initiative can perhaps be found in its regional context. His nationwide address came less than three weeks after Palestinian presidential elections and just four days before Iraqi parliamentary elections. The speech itself praised the former and encouraged participation in the latter. In fact, these were the only other topics the king discussed, underscoring the ineluctable connection between political reform in Jordan and political reform in the local neighborhood. Whatever the outcome of the decentralization plan, Jordan seems intent on taking steps to keep pace with the widening of popular participation in the surrounding region. Democracy may not be surging, but its ripple effects are unmistakable.

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