

Jordan: All Quiet on the Eastern Front?

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Progress on the economic and political fronts is helping to insulate the monarchy from the instability currently sweeping the region.

With the spotlight focused on the Palestinian application for statehood at the UN and the ongoing massacre of demonstrators in Syria, little attention has been paid to Jordan, where the parliament has been debating and voting on forty-two proposed changes to the kingdom's 1952 constitution. The reform project is King Abdullah's attempt to preempt the kind of protests that brought down regimes in Egypt and Tunisia. While the palace's suggested slate of constitutional amendments have not yet been sufficient to end the ongoing weekly protests, the combination of this reform initiative and the financial benefits that will attend Jordanian membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) may help stabilize the kingdom and consolidate the Hashemite regime.

Proposed Amendments

In February and March, Jordan witnessed mass protests in areas largely populated by East Bankers, or citizens traditionally considered most loyal to the monarchy. Because the demonstrations came so close on the heels of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, King Abdullah responded quickly by dismissing the government, replacing business-friendly technocrat Prime Minister Samir Rifai with retired flag officer, diplomat, and peacemaker Marouf Bakhit, an East Banker who hails from the prominent Abbadi tribe. And in June, the king announced his "reform vision for the Jordan of the future," an agenda he said would include constitutional and electoral changes. He established the Royal Committee on Constitutional Review and tasked the group with suggesting amendments to the charter.

On August 14, the king rolled out the proposed amendments. Among the more significant recommendations was the establishment of a Constitutional Court and an independent elections commission. Suggested amendments also included lowering the age for members of parliament from thirty to twenty-five, moving electoral oversight from parliament to the judiciary, prohibiting the passage of legislation by the cabinet (when parliament is dissolved, for example), and limiting the king's ability to dismiss the legislature. Interestingly, these changes, if adopted, would exclude Jordanian citizens with dual nationality from serving in either parliament or government -- a modification that could have considerable impact on the composition of future parliaments, affecting not necessarily Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin, but Jordanians possessing Western passports.

The reform document was defined not only by its recommendations, but also by its omissions. For example, the suggested amendments did not include dissolving state security courts or limiting the king's authority to appoint members of the senate. Likewise, they did not stipulate that future governments would be formed by parliamentary majorities rather than the current practice of royal appointment.

Islamist Critics

Although the reforms are limited in scope, a majority of Jordanians appear to view them as a more or less positive step. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Islamists have been the chief critics. Topping their list of complaints has been the demand that parliamentary majorities determine the government. Indeed, according to Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood secretary-general Hamza Mansour, all of the other amendments would "lose their value" if Article 35 -- which specifies the king's role in appointing and dismissing governments -- remains. Or as Zaki Bani Irsheid, head of the Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front (IAF), put it, "Executive power must lie in the hands of the people. Governments must be formed from a parliamentary majority."

Islamists have also been displeased with the direction of the ongoing National Dialogue, which the IAF is boycotting. The IAF has suffered for nearly two decades under the 1993 law (amended in 2010) that shifted Jordan's electoral process from a "multiple seat, multiple vote" format to a "multiple seat, single vote" format, a change that forced Jordanian voters to choose between their tribal affiliation and their political views, severely undercutting the Islamists' performance at the ballot box. To improve its odds, the IAF is demanding "a modern electoral law." According to a communique issued on September 19, this would include electing half of the parliament by a national list, and the other half by simple majority at the district level. The IAF is also calling for wholesale redistricting to reverse the gerrymandering that has historically benefitted East Bankers over Palestinian and Islamist Jordanians.

Not all of the amendments will pass, of course. Parliament has already refused the proposal to lower the minimum age for legislators to twenty-five. Meanwhile, the monarchy is all but certain to ignore requests for meaningful electoral reform at this time.

Economic Challenges Persist

Notwithstanding the generally positive reaction to the amendments, the king's political reform agenda may not be sufficient to satisfy -- and demobilize -- the demonstrators. That is because much of the popular foment driving the protests is related to economic factors, in particular endemic unemployment and rising food costs. The Jordanian economy has never been particularly strong, but the combination of a spike in commodity prices and the regional instability brought on by uprisings in other countries has taken a heavy toll. In the first five months of 2011 alone, the kingdom experienced a 60 percent decline in investment and a dramatic drop in Western tourism. Even before January, Jordan's unofficial unemployment rate stood at 30 percent, according to the CIA.

In addition to moving forward on political reforms, the king responded to the February demonstrations by announcing \$650 million in emergency social expenditures. Although this deficit spending has diminished the intensity of the protests to some extent, it is not a long-term fix. Like Tunisians and Egyptians, Jordanians find themselves in increasingly dire economic conditions -- a situation highlighted most tragically on September 10, when a twenty-nine-year-old street vendor in Mafraq took a page from Tunisia's Mohammed Bouazizi and lit himself on fire when the police removed his vegetable stand.

Jordan's bleak economic outlook brightened somewhat in May, however, when the kingdom was invited to become a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This development promises to bring significant relief to the beleaguered state. Saudi Arabia has already provided a \$400 million grant, and according to Jordanian daily *al-Arab al-Yawm*, the GCC pledged during a September 11 meeting of foreign ministers to give \$2 billion per year over the next five years. As Jordanian commentator Salama al-Dirawi recently pointed out, "If it wasn't for Saudi Arabian financial grants, Jordan wouldn't have an economy this year." Moreover, Jordan has seen a 26 percent increase in the number of tourists from GCC countries since January. Perhaps more important, Amman is hoping that GCC membership will help more Jordanians get hired throughout the Gulf, lowering the kingdom's unemployment rate and increasing remittances that currently account for 13 percent of gross domestic product.

Conclusion

Jordan continues to face a broad range of political and economic challenges. Yet by being proactive on the political reform front, the monarchy has -- in the words of King Abdullah -- put itself "ahead of the curve" for now. According to a September survey by the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies, 72 percent of Jordanians familiar with the constitutional amendments regard them as a positive step forward. The kingdom's perennial economic woes will be more difficult to remedy, but if GCC pledges are met, the generous financial assistance should likewise help ameliorate the immediate crisis.

One potential downside of Jordan's impending association with the GCC may be the attendant pressure on King Abdullah to take a tougher line -- at least rhetorically -- on Israel, in accordance with the Saudi position. Indeed, the king's uncharacteristically harsh remarks last month on Israel may already reflect this dynamic. Regardless of the change in tone, however, Jordan is not another Egypt, where populist politics have embraced disdain for the peace treaty with Israel since the revolution. King Abdullah remains publicly committed to the Jordanian treaty with the Jewish state.

Overall, then, progress on the economic and political fronts is helping to insulate the monarchy from the instability currently sweeping the region. Of course, the Palestinians' UN membership bid could spur violence across the river in the West Bank, with potential reverberations in the kingdom. For the time being, however, King Abdullah seems to have come up with a formula to ensure stability and secure the realm.

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