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# DELIBERALIZATION IN JORDAN

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In 1989, with the first Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) raging just across the Jordan River in the West Bank, domestic discontent spilling into his own streets, and his country's finances in tatters, Jordan's King Hussein (r. 1953–99) began taking a series of extraordinary steps toward political opening. He ended repression, called new elections to replace the National Assembly that he had dissolved in 1988, and forged a national pact that put Jordan at the forefront of liberalization in the Arab world. As the late king's son and designated successor Abdallah II faces a similar situation more than a decade later, however, the regime is nearing the completion of a full circle back to martial law.

Jordan has not fully returned to military rule, but the legislature has again been indefinitely suspended, and most public protests are banned. While the majority of Jordanians today do not question their monarch's legitimacy, they do increasingly resent his policies—particularly his continued alliance with the United States at a time when U.S. policy toward Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have made that alliance less popular than ever. It is quite conceivable, in fact, that a U.S. military presence in Jordan during a war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq could provoke an insurrection against against Abdallah II and the Hashemite dynasty. The Jordanian monarchy has managed to hang on through the tumults of the past decade-and-a-half by adroitly wielding the twin survival strategies of liberalization and deliberalization—using the former when royal interests seemed to dictate and reversing the process when the opposition threatened to get too strong.

Jordan's population of 5.3 million is overwhelmingly composed of Sunni Muslim Arabs. About half the population is of Palestinian lineage. Many of these Jordanian Palestinians have roots in the West Bank or in what today is Israel, and a personal or family history of displacement due to the Israeli-Arab conflicts since 1948. Their sometimes-uneasy presence, as well as the history of strife between Palestinian nationalist groups and the Hashemite monarchy, make for a societal divide that threatens to exacerbate whatever domestic tensions may arise over regional political developments.

Jordan's political liberalization in the 1990s was not a deliberate process of democratization, but rather a survival strategy chosen by a monarchy anxious to shore up its legitimacy in the face of domestic discontent over peace with Israel and the pain caused by structural adjustment in this small, resource-poor country. In time, after critics of the king's foreign and economic policies gained more ability to speak out forcefully than he liked, the strategy was gradually abandoned and the reforms were slowly rolled back. Liberalization gave way to its opposite, deliberalization.

Even with political liberties at their lowest ebb in years, as they are today, Jordanians feel that they enjoy far more pluralism and openness than do their neighbors in Saudi Arabia, Syria, or Iraq. Jordan's relative openness has much to do with a legacy of regime-led state-building dating back to the creation of the Jordanian state. Hussein's grandfather, Emir (later King) Abdallah I (d. 1951) founded what was then called Transjordan in the 1920s under British auspices out of the wreckage of the collapsed Ottoman Turkish Empire. Over the ensuing eight decades, a modern state has been built with the Hashemite monarchy at its core. That monarchy has survived the acquisition of the West Bank as a result of the 1948 war with Israel; the original King Abdallah's assassination; his son Talal's deposition in 1952; the turbulence surrounding Arab nationalism in the 1950s; the loss of the West Bank to Israel during the Six Day War of June 1967; and bloody domestic clashes between royal troops and Palestinian nationalists during the "Black September" of 1970.

The monarchy weathered each of these crises in turn, emerging more firmly entrenched and at the head of a more expansive supporting coalition than ever before. The oil boom of the late 1970s invigorated the economy of Jordan, which itself has no oil but occupies an advantageous position near the oil-rich Gulf region. (An upsurge in aid from other Arab countries helped as well.) When the oil boom went bust in the 1980s, however, the country's financial strength began to erode. In 1988, in response to forceful calls for Palestinian self-determination vis-à-vis Israel, King Hussein decided to sever ties with the West Bank. The decision prompted capital flight by nervous Jordanian Palestinian businessmen—the main financiers of Jordan's private sector. The re-

sulting currency devaluation intensified the fiscal crisis, sending Jordan into the arms of Western donors for a bailout.<sup>1</sup>

### Crisis and Opening

The monarchy then introduced a number of unpopular economic reforms in order to satisfy its creditors, leading many average Jordanians to protest against the resultant cuts in daily subsidies. Riots broke out in a number of traditional bastions of support for the regime.<sup>2</sup> Instead of using coercion, King Hussein opted for tactical political opening. He shook up his cabinet and in November 1989 held the first full parliamentary elections in more than 20 years. Soon thereafter, he called for a National Charter, signed in 1991, in which a broad cross-section of Jordan's elites agreed on plans for institutional reform. The new National Assembly subsequently re-legalized political parties (which had been banned since 1957) and eased press censorship. Martial law formally ended in 1991, and Jordan appeared to be stepping off on a march toward democracy.

The elections of 1989 were the freest that Jordan had ever seen. They also revealed what the balance of power between the regime's supporters and the opposition looked like after decades of martial law. Although the king still appointed the upper House of Notables, the 80-member House of Representatives was elected by universal suffrage—albeit in a gerrymandered system that strongly favored the regime's rural supporters over the ideologically mobilized urban opposition. Proregime forces therefore fared well, though not as well as expected. The big story was that despite glaring malapportionment, the opposition factions combined to win 39 House seats. The moderate Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), won the largest single share with 23 seats. The Jordanian MB, unlike its counterparts in Syria and Egypt, had enjoyed a relatively cooperative relationship with the regime, though in the 1980s the MB began to back a reformist agenda increasingly opposed to royal policies, if not to the monarchy itself. Traditional opposition groupings of leftists and Arab nationalists rounded out the ranks of elected legislators. This new parliament used its constitutional powers to test successive prime ministers and cabinets in confidence votes and grill them in budget debates. It also helped push King Hussein into his neutralist policy during the Gulf War, which was popular at home even as it dismayed Jordan's Western allies.<sup>3</sup>

Despite official claims to the contrary, the political openings of the early 1990s were never designed to produce full-fledged democracy in Jordan. As one of King Hussein's key advisors during this period remarked, liberalization was intended to invite more guests into the living room for "coffee talk," with a few welcome to stay for dinner. None were to be invited into the kitchen, though, and certainly none were welcome in the rest of the house.<sup>4</sup> Parliament could debate some internal issues, in

other words, but its involvement in foreign and economic policies was not welcomed. And yet foreign and economic policies were matters of acute concern to most Jordanians; when the threat of the opposition mobilizing those concerns became apparent, the regime began to have second thoughts about the usefulness of political liberalization.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1990s, King Hussein pledged his country's support for the U.S.-led Middle East peace process and robustly implemented an IMF-sponsored economic reform package. As early as 1991, however, the regime began to see the difficulties of simultaneously accommodating a shift toward negotiations with Israel *and* increased political opening. In response to Jordan's participation in the Madrid peace conference—which opened a new chapter in Arab negotiations with Israel—Prime Minister Tahir al-Masri lost his support in parliament and resigned in anticipation of losing a confidence vote. In spite of this episode, which affirmed parliament's constitutional role in holding the executive responsible, cabinet ministers in Jordan still worry more about retaining the king's than the legislature's confidence.

In August 1993, as peace with Israel drew palpably closer through peace talks in Washington, King Hussein decreed new electoral rules designed to shrink the opposition's seat share. By introducing a system based on the single, nontransferable vote (SNTV), he rewarded rural and tribal allies while further rigging electoral outcomes against city-based opposition candidates, particularly those from the MB. As a result of the new electoral law, the opposition lost nearly half its seats in the November 1993 elections. After Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the Oslo Accords in September 1993, Jordan moved to make peace with Israel as well. In October 1994, the two countries signed a full peace treaty that the weakened opposition was unable even to delay, let alone block. Instead, the new legislature speedily ratified the treaty, which was not signed until the monarchy had taken the precaution of imposing a ban on public demonstrations.<sup>6</sup>

The regime tried to sell the virtues of peace with Israel to a skeptical but apathetic public by promising that the United States would shower Jordan with the kind of aid that Egypt got after the 1978 Camp David Accords. But Western assistance was a trickle rather than a flood, and Jordan's economy continued to struggle. When the peace process began to stall after Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist in 1995, King Hussein responded by deepening Jordan's implementation of IMF structural-adjustment reforms. By 1996, Jordan had raised taxes, cut government spending (especially on public-sector salaries), and begun, albeit hesitantly, a program of privatization. It had not, however, tackled consumer subsidies—one of the major requirements of the IMF package. In August of the same year, the cabinet ignored the widespread objections that were being heard even in parliament and raised the price of bread. Riots against subsidy cuts broke out

in many of the same cities that had revolted in 1989. Whereas the violent protests of that earlier year had prompted political opening, in 1996 the regime responded with force.

### The Years of Rollback

In the late 1990s, the regime continued to roll back its earlier political liberalization. The opposition threatened to mobilize a public angry at the pain caused by economic reform, while the unpopularity of normalized relations with Israel compounded their potential to do so. In contrast to Egypt's stable but distant relationship with Israel, King Hussein saw the peace process as leading toward a new regional order in which Jordan would act as Israel's intermediary in the Arab world. As the peace process slowed under Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, Jordanian supporters of peace began to see their vision of "a new Middle East" fading. The opposition capitalized on this by calling on Jordanians to reject the normalization of political and economic relations with Israel. Although the opposition could not block the legislation by which such normalization would be carried out, it did succeed in uniting its disparate ranks around opposition to normalization. For example, Jordan's professional associations—its syndicates of middle-class professionals, nearly all controlled by the opposition—began to expel members who visited Israel. The opposition also managed to close a trade fair put on by Israeli companies in Amman in January 1997 through peaceful protests that drew nearly 4,000 demonstrators.

The regime came to perceive the growing institutionalization of anti-normalization forces as a potentially serious threat not merely to the monarchy's policies but to its very survival. King Hussein feared that the link pervasively made between the pain of economic reforms, on the one hand, and the growing consensus against normalization of relations with Israel, on the other, could become not just the basis for a series of disjointed, spontaneous demonstrations but a viable opposition platform that might be enough to support a full-scale antiregime mobilization. With parliamentary elections due in November 1997, King Hussein ordered further limits on political liberties, hoping that the crackdown would prevent opposition electoral gains that could upset his plans to push further economic reforms through parliament.<sup>7</sup>

To silence critics of its economic and foreign policies, the regime decreed restrictive amendments to the press law in May 1997. This sparked an outcry not only from the opposition and international human rights observers, but from liberal regime supporters as well. When the newly amended law was invoked in order to shut down most of Jordan's weekly newspapers, the aggrieved asked the courts to overturn the decree. The courts did so, but did not hand down their decision until long after the November elections were over.

The changing by decree of the election and press laws, as well as the signing of the peace treaty with Israel, led the MB to call for a boycott of the 1997 elections. Most opposition parties joined the boycott, as did a range of disillusioned liberals who had traditionally backed the regime. The boycotters demanded a repeal of the press and election decrees and a reversal of the normalization process with Israel. The regime refused to budge, and the upshot was that the opposition wound up shutting itself out of the legislature which was chosen that autumn with nothing to show for the sacrifice of its seats. While overall voter participation was lower than it had been in 1989 or 1993, it was not so low that it embarrassed the monarchy, which benefited from record levels of rural turnout. Only a token opposition presence remained in parliament, and most deputies were strong supporters of the regime.

The regime's pliant new parliament quickly passed legislation to curb the press. The 1998 press law even earned new Prime Minister Abd al-Salem al-Majali a spot on the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists' list of the "Ten Worst Enemies of the Press." The opposition could do little to oppose the changes, which prompted the editor of the *Jordan Times* to lament that with respect to the freedom of the press, Jordan had sadly come "full circle . . . to martial law."<sup>8</sup>

As parliament debated the new press law, King Hussein gave regency powers to his younger brother, Crown Prince Hassan, and left the country to seek cancer treatment in the United States. Jordanians spent months preparing themselves for the end of Hussein's almost half-century-long reign, which came with his death in February 1999. What they did not anticipate was the surprise emergence of Hussein's son, Abdallah, as heir to the throne: Less than two weeks before he succumbed, the dying king had decided to displace his younger brother and name Abdallah as successor. In contrast with his father's focus on regional politics, Abdallah II placed greatest stress on Jordan's economic reform and its integration into the world economy. He requested that parliament remove some of the provisions of the restrictive press law, and even ventured out into the public in disguise in order to uncover administrative inefficiencies, earning public accolades.

But King Abdallah's taste for liberalization would prove short-lived. In 1999, as negotiations got underway on a final-status agreement between the PLO and Israel, Abdallah pledged Jordanian support for the peace process while further limiting the scope for public opposition to it: A September 1999 crackdown on the Jordanian offices of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement ( Hamas ) demonstrated that the regime's tolerance of dissent had reached a limit. When the second *intifada* erupted in September 2000 and the Palestinian-Israeli final-status negotiations broke down, the renewed conflict in the West Bank echoed in Jordanian domestic politics—just as it had during the first *intifada*, which began in 1987. The king and his cabinet perceived the new uprising as a threat

not only to Jordan's peace agreement with Israel but also to the survival of the regime itself. Externally, Jordan maintained its peace treaty with Israel, but it cooled Jordanian-Israeli relations: When Jordan's ambassador to Israel finished his term in November 2000, he was not replaced.

Meanwhile, the regime showed little tolerance for public manifestations of support for the uprising. A ban on demonstrations was imposed after rallies in early October 2000 led to property damage and one shooting death. When the opposition staged a march in the Jordan Valley that drew almost 20,000 people, security forces broke it up with violence. In May 2001 and April 2002, masses of demonstrators returned to the streets of the capital city of Amman, once again meeting with forceful suppression—although those few demonstrations that officials had permitted had generally been peaceful.

The parliament elected in 1997 finished its term in 2001. Although the House of Representatives was overwhelmingly proregime, it often resisted royal initiatives to cut government spending and to integrate Jordan further into the global economy. The House, for example, rejected plans to raise taxes and strengthen antitrust laws. When the legislature's term ended in June 2001, King Abdallah dissolved the assembly and began to rule by decree, announcing that parliament would return after new elections.

One of the first decrees simplified voting registration and added 24 seats to the House of Representatives, but did little else to change the controversial electoral system. The cabinet claimed that the elections slated for November 2001 would be delayed for at least 10 months in order to allow voters to register into the new electoral system. In August 2002, elections were again postponed at least until the spring of 2003. Although ostensibly for procedural reasons, it seemed clear that the delays were actually motivated by the regime's fear of holding elections with the *intifada* raging next door and U.S.-led military action against Iraq possibly imminent.<sup>9</sup> Since June 2001, more than 80 other laws have been decreed.<sup>10</sup>

The second *intifada* and related regional developments have led the cautious Jordanian regime to stifle domestic discontent, with force if necessary. With parliament suspended indefinitely, rallies banned, laws being decreed at a dizzying pace, former parliamentarians being jailed, and round-ups of militants leading to curfews, there is widespread speculation both within and outside the country that a full return to martial law is pending. Moreover, Jordan's economy remains weak and aid-dependent despite nearly 15 years of structural adjustment. Jordan's liberalization project was intended to generate support for foreign and economic policies that the regime saw as necessary for its survival. Inadvertently, liberalization gave voice to opposition critics who could not reconcile themselves to peace with Israel. Liberalization also allowed domestic vested interests to veto structural-adjustment measures. Eventually, with

little or no tangible benefits accruing from either economic or foreign policies, the regime saw that domestic public opinion could be mobilized against the regime's policies if not the monarchy itself. This realization led to increasing deliberalization, thus bringing Jordan nearly full circle back to martial law. Currently, though, Jordan's liberalized autocracy seems perilously close to veering sharply enough in the direction of deliberalization to become autocracy plain and simple.

### NOTES

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1. Rex Brynen, "Economic Crisis and Post-Rentier Democratization in the Arab World: The Case of Jordan," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 25 (March 1992): 69–97.
2. In contrast, the Palestinian refugee camps around the capital Amman remained quiet.
3. Laurie Brand, "Liberalization and Changing Political Coalitions: The Bases of Jordan's 1990–1991 Gulf Crisis Policy," *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 13 (December 1991): 1–46.
4. Author's interview with Adnan Abu Odeh, former chief of the Royal Hashemite Court, Amman, Jordan, 9 March 1998.
5. Glenn Robinson, "Defensive Democratization in Jordan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30 (August 1998): 387–410.
6. Laurie Brand, "The Effects of the Peace Process on Political Liberalization in Jordan," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28 (Winter 1999): 52–67.
7. Curtis Ryan, "Peace, Bread and Riots: Jordan and the International Monetary Fund," *Middle East Policy* 6 (October 1998): 54–66.
8. Committee to Protect Journalists, *Attacks on the Press 1997* (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 1998). Author's interview with Abdullah Hassanat, editor of the *Jordan Times*, Amman, Jordan, 23 June 1998.
9. *Jordan Times* (Amman), 16 August 2002.
10. *Middle East International*, 31 May 2002; *The Economist*, 6 June 2002.

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**CORRECTIONS:** In "Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy" (Volume 13, No. 4, October 2002), Daniel Brumberg wrote that the Islamists won 20 of the parliament's 50 seats in the 1999 elections in Jordan. In fact, the last Jordanian elections were held in 1997 and were boycotted by the Islamist party. Moreover, there are 80 rather than 50 seats in the parliament. The *Journal of Democracy* regrets the errors.