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Political Standoff in Jordan

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The demonstration of Friday, October 5, 2012 in front of the Hussein Mosque in Amman was the biggest demonstration in Jordan since the Arab uprising began. For the time being, that is a piece of good news for the Jordanian opposition, maybe the only one. Under the banner of "Save the Nation," the organizers, mostly the Islamic Action Front, which encompasses the Muslim Brotherhood and some seventy different opposition groups, cannot be satisfied with 10,000 participants, once they publicly raised the bar, working for weeks to hold a demonstration of 50,000 people in the spirit of the Egyptian "Millioniya."

The various security agencies judged in advance the inability of the organizers to mobilize 50,000 people, and the counter, pro-government demonstration was cancelled. Prime Minister Faez Tarwaneh felt confident and safe enough to leave Amman the day before and meet the Palestinian President and Prime Minister in Ramallah. At the same time, if any internal political dividends were expected from this visit, few could be collected – the Palestinian issue is almost non-existent on the opposition's agenda.

But King Abdullah II cannot enjoy the opposition's failure to reach the numerical target for long. The opposition's major demands were sounded loud and clear from the center of Amman in front of the Hussein Mosque, as well as through all the media channels that were not barred from reporting: a constitutional monarchy, a parliament elected in a fully democratic system, a genuine campaign against corruption, independence of the judicial system, and end of the involvement of the security agencies in political and civilian affairs. The most difficult demand is of course the electoral system and the powers of the king. The stalemate on this issue remains unresolved. King Abdullah is determined to proceed with his plan to hold general elections before the end of the year. Last week he dissolved the parliament and voter registration continues, albeit at a slow pace, thus far reaching, according to government sources, two thirds of those eligible (approximately 3 million people). The opposition, on the other hand, continues to boycott the planned elections. The regime and the opposition have held talks between Muslim Brotherhood leaders and political personalities who played a role in various governments in the past, such as Faez Faisal and Jawad Anani, but these talks have not yet produced a bridging

formula. However, they may have helped end last Friday's rally in a peaceful manner. The fact that the government backed away from holding a counter demonstration and the restrained manner in which the security forces dealt with the few hotheaded demonstrators may help further negotiations between government and opposition, but that remains to be seen.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the smaller opposition groups must now reassess the Friday rally. The failure to mobilize 50,000 demonstrators can influence their political calculations in two entirely different ways. On the one hand, and judging by interviews they gave after the rally, they may decide that their power is not in the numbers but in the quality of the message, and therefore they will continue to boycott the elections until they squeeze more concessions from the palace. These may be in the form of more parliament deputies elected on a national, rather than district level, or the postponement of the elections beyond the end of the year. The opposition may desire this postponement as it is evident from the relatively poor showing last Friday that it is not logistically ready to face the pro-regime voters in general elections.

On the other hand, the King may be emboldened by the smaller than promised demonstration but he will still have to decide how to best deal with the opposition. He may proceed with his plan, as indicated by the appointment of the Constitutional Court, the dissolution of Parliament, and the resignation of the current government. He will be called on to take stronger measures to combat corruption. But if the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups continue to boycott the elections, the regime faces the danger that the next parliament will be labeled by the opposition as a puppet parliament, losing legitimacy before it is even convened. In this situation and if both the palace and the opposition fear losing ground, a compromise is more likely to be attained. Nonetheless, in the long run the regime will continue to face a growing opposition, especially if the uprisings succeed elsewhere in the region and there is no significant improvement in the economic situation.

On October 5, the same day of the rally, the Jordanian Finance Minister announced that Kuwait had transferred \$250 million as part of the \$5 billion committed by four members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The timing of the announcement is not accidental, but more measures must follow in order for the regime to mollify some of the elements that joined the opposition, mostly as a way of protesting the hike in prices and elimination of certain subsidies.