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The Elections in Jordan: People Want Evolution, Not Revolution

Jordanian Discourse on the Social Networks, February 2013

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On January 23, 2013 elections were held for the seventeenth Jordanian parliament, and some 1,475 candidates competed for 150 parliamentary seats. Of a total population of 6.2 million, 3.3 million Jordanians are eligible to vote, and of these, 2.3 million were registered. Voter turnout indicated that 1.27 million Jordanians, some 56.7 percent of those registered, exercised their right to vote, an increase of some 4 percent over the 2010 elections. Attempts by the palace to engage the Muslim Brotherhood in dialogue prior to the elections were unsuccessful, and the movement called for a boycott of the elections.

The discussion on the Jordanian social networks about the elections has focused on three main issues:

- a. The roadmap of King Abdullah II, which seeks a transition to a parliamentary democracy and a gradual change in the social pyramid through a focus on the next generation, at the expense of tribal leaders who have long been the King's base of support.
- b. The consequences of the "Arab Spring" for Jordan, the fear of loss of control and stability, and the young people's preference for evolution over revolution.
- c. The election results: a tactical victory for the King, the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the victory of the conservatives, tribal leaders, and even businessmen.

The King's roadmap to democracy and the expansion of civilian involvement: Some two weeks before the parliamentary elections and after a number of rounds of meetings between the King and opposition figures, but particularly with groups of young people, the King chose to publish on his official website and on social networking sites two documents discussing his vision: "Making our Democratic System Work for All Jordanians,"¹ and "Our Journey to Forge our Path towards Democracy."²

In the former document, Abdullah II promises for the first time in Jordanian history that the prime minister will be chosen on the basis of "consultations with the majority



coalition of parliamentary blocs,” or if there is no clear majority in the Lower House, on the basis of “consultation with all parliamentary blocs.” However, he indicates that his vision of turning Jordan into a constitutional monarchy with an active parliament cannot be put into practice immediately, and is likely to involve a gradual process unfolding over “several parliamentary cycles.” In addition, the King explains that the mechanism required to complete the democratic process must be based on three conditions: a) "true national parties"; b) the development and professionalization of the civil service; and c) "a change in parliamentary conventions" to support parliamentary government. The King emphasizes the need for political pluralism, an active civil society, and constitutional protection of the rights of minorities living in Jordan.

In the second document, the King discusses his goal of encouraging an internal debate about the major issues facing the country and Jordan’s progress toward democratic development. He stresses the importance of focusing on the national interest, stating that “no individual or group will get everything it wants,” and that Jordanians must compromise for the sake of their common interest. The King invites Jordanians to help tackle key social issues, among them poverty, unemployment, corruption, the cost of living, transportation, and health services.

The consequences of the "Arab Spring": The next generation is demanding evolution, not revolution. The discussion on the social networks suggests that the Jordanians, be they Palestinian or Transjordanian, see the "Arab Spring" as an existential threat to the security, integrity, and future of the Hashemite Kingdom. If initially they waved the banner of “social justice” and the demand for democracy, the recent elections show some maturation and a better understanding of the situation. When the Jordanians look to the north (Syria), to the east (Iraq), to the south (Egypt), and even to the West (the Palestinians), they see civil wars, death, chaos, poverty, refugees, extremism, and the collapse of governmental systems. The social media discourse indicates that at this point, the younger generation (20-40 years old) sees the Arab spring as a risk more than an opportunity, despite their aspiration to make changes in Jordan's social, economic, and political structure. The online criticism of the regime and the parliament has changed direction, and the current discussion is about responsibility, the need for a change in the socio-cultural structure, and the building of a non-corrupt, robust, hardworking society that sports active social and political involvement from its citizens. However, as long as there is no in-depth change in society and a change in the political system, namely, party pluralism and a transition from particularistic interests to national interests, the change in governments will be cosmetic only.



Election results: The analysis by Jordanian bloggers of the dry numbers from the election results highlights three themes:

- a. Long live the King and long live the Kingdom: The King's extensive work to forge a direct dialogue with young activists in the kingdom has borne fruit. Young people who in the past were apathetic and refrained from voting this time went to the polling stations and documented the election process to prove that there was no fraud. In spite of many calls to boycott the elections and to hold demonstrations close to election day, Jordanian citizens elected to vote. This indicates the support of both the old and the new centers of power for the King, and the desire to give him a stable basis for legitimacy against opposition forces that attempt to undermine the stability of the kingdom.
- b. The failure of the Muslim Brotherhood: Although the Islamists (from the centrist stream) who are not connected to the Muslim Brotherhood won 37 seats in the parliament (about 25 percent), the consensus among social media users is that the success of the election process, the relatively high voter turnout, and the lack of a massive boycott of the elections constitute a major blow for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Jordanian public, which sees political Islam growing stronger in Egypt, Syria, and among the Palestinians, is not interested in seeing Jordan descend into chaos. The traditional center of power – tribal leaders – and the rising centers of power – young Transjordanian activists – have in practice joined together against the Muslim Brotherhood.
- c. A crushing victory for tribal leaders, conservatives, and regime loyalists: The sense is that nothing has changed, and that those who won the elections are the same familiar faces and figures who perpetuate the old system that Jordan's young people wish to change. Therefore, there is much skepticism about the King's ability to make any real change and implement reforms.

Conclusion

Preparing for the elections, the King made effective use of the potential of social networks, which allowed a direct approach to liberal young people who want change while maintaining stability in the kingdom. Given the results of the elections, the King knows that his room for flexibility to undertake far reaching reforms is limited, with his basis for legitimacy resting on tribal leaders and those with provincial and tribal interests. The next generation will support the King as long as he establishes a gradual process to weaken the traditional and Islamic centers of power, promotes free political discussion, and allows the growth of a young political leadership, while constructing a broad civil partnership. In a process that will unfold over a number of years, a young and more urban



and modern, leadership will emerge that can be an alternative basis for legitimacy and support for the King.

The younger generation in Jordan is proposing a softer alternative to the violent and bloody model of the Arab spring. This approach advocates evolution, not revolution, gradual internal changes that do not prompt a breakdown of existing frameworks and the collapse of the social-economic-political pyramid, which would lead to bloodshed and chaos. Existential fear unites those demanding change around the King, instead of spurring them to oppose him.

The monarchy in Jordan is expected to grow stronger if the King correctly exploits the new trend and reinforces it with modernization and democratization processes and the creation of conditions for the emergence of a young leadership. Nevertheless, as the election results indicate, the traditional centers of power will not cede their influence easily. The question is, then, whether the positive changes and trends among the younger generation in Jordan and the roadmap outlined by the King succeed in maintaining the regime's stability and the socio-political structure of the Hashemite Kingdom.

¹ Reprinted in <http://jordantimes.com/hiking-outlines-roadmap-for-democratic-transformation>.

² Reprinted in <http://jordantimes.com/king-urges-full-citizen-engagement-in-democratisation>.

