

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Case Study #11

Country Jordan

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COUNTRY BACKGROUND: HASHEMITE KINGDOM OF JORDAN | Karim Merhej |

GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

Although the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is nominally a constitutional monarchy, the king retains wide executive and legislative powers. The prime minister and the ministers, in addition to all members of the Upper House of Parliament (Senate), are appointed by the king¹, whereas representatives in the Lower House of Parliament (Chamber of Deputies) are elected by citizens through elections that are usually observed as free and fair. In addition, all legislations passed by the parliament or submitted by the government to the Chamber of Deputies must be approved by the Senate, and ultimately by the king through a royal decree^{2,3}. To further illustrate the primacy of the king in Jordan's sociopolitical environment, article 30 of the constitution states that "The King is the Head of State and is immune from any liability and responsibility," which virtually makes him above-the-law, while article 32 states that he is "the Supreme Commander of the Land, Naval and Air forces."⁴

The Royal Court has a significant amount of power and influence in running the socioeconomic and political affairs in Jordan, and chiefs of the Royal Court often have more clout and influence than prime ministers (Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, 2009, p.97).

Despite wielding certain legislative powers, the Chamber of Deputies has been rendered a largely toothless body due to gerrymandered electoral districts (where traditionally pro-monarchy rural areas are vastly overrepresented at the expense of large urban centers) and the imposition of a "one-man one-vote" policy in elections since the 1993 parliamentary elections. Currently, the Chamber of Deputies is composed overwhelmingly of independent tribal figures or wealthy businessmen who use their parliamentary seats less for bringing forth legislations and monitoring the government's performance, and more for distributing patronage among their constituents. As a matter of fact, Yom (2017) argues that the regime strives to ensure that parliaments are unrepresentative and inefficient, so that citizens are discouraged from "trusting public officials" and view "royal autocracy [as] something to be valued, even cherished."⁵

Opposition parties – most of which have lost their once-held mass appeal, with the exception of the Islamic Action Front – remain barely represented in the parliament, with minimal influence on decision-making.

¹Article 35 of the Jordanian constitution stipulates that the king appoints the prime minister and the ministers, and may dismiss them or accept their resignation. The constitution can be viewed here: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6b53310.pdf>

²Article 31 of the Jordanian constitution stipulates that the king ratifies laws and promulgates them. The constitution can be viewed here: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6b53310.pdf>

³A comprehensive overview of the legislative process in Jordan can be accessed here: <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/government3.html>

⁴Articles 30 and 32 of the Jordanian constitution. Retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6b53310.pdf>

⁵Yom, S. (2017). *Why Jordan and Morocco are doubling down on royal rule*. Retrieved from <https://wapo.st/2TWq8k6>

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Since its establishment as the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921, Jordan has been reliant on foreign aid, and the Hashemite Kings have sought to adopt an ostensibly pro-Western foreign policy agenda. Since it sided with the conservative Arab bloc led by Saudi Arabia during the “Arab Cold War” (Kerr, 1971), Jordan has been a staunch ally of its oil-rich neighbors to the south, relying on them for assistance as well as for welcoming skilled Jordanian expatriate workers. Although no official government statistics exist, it is estimated that in 2014, there were around 785,000 Jordanian expatriates, most of whom lived in Gulf countries⁶ (Bel-Air, 2016).

Due to its location at the very heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jordan has suffered from significant exogenous shocks throughout its history, including the influx of a large number of Palestinian refugees during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war (the Nakba) after which Jordan annexed the West Bank, which it then lost during the 1967 Six-Day War. In addition, during the events of Black September in 1970, the Jordanian army and Palestinian fedayeen were engaged in numerous armed skirmishes which resulted in the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Jordan and severe curtailments on civil rights and liberties.

The Jordanian economy had begun to transition into a service-based economy reliant on foreign remittances and assistance in the 1970s. The oil busts of the 1980s brought about serious socioeconomic crises as foreign remittances from Jordanian expatriates diminished significantly, and Jordan's Gulf allies reduced their financial assistance due to the decreasing oil prices. By 1989, the Jordanian economy was on the verge of collapsing, which prompted the Jordanian government to undergo a series of IMF-imposed economic reforms.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent US-led Operation Desert Storm in early 1991 had severe ramifications for Jordan, as the kingdom's traditional Gulf and Western allies severely reduced the level of material assistance due to the fact that King Hussein did not join the US-led military effort following significant popular pressure (Shlaim, 2008). Moreover, following the restoration of the Al Sabah monarchy in Kuwait, around 300,000 Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship were expelled from Kuwait, creating new socioeconomic problems for Jordan (Van Hear, 1995). The Wadi Araba Treaty of 1994, which established peace between Jordan and Israel, ended Jordan's diplomatic isolation and brought it back into the fold of the US-Saudi alliance.

In recent years, Jordan has come under intense pressure on a multitude of fronts. Internally speaking, the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 left its mark on Jordan. Thousands of Jordanians from all walks of life and from numerous parts of the country engaged in mostly peaceful protests against the Hashemite regime, directing their anger against the neoliberal economic policies of successive governments. While protests dampened by late 2012, due in part to the worsening situation in neighboring Syria which dissuaded the general population from protesting, the socio-economic grievances that led to the protests in the first place remained (Ryan, 2018). Externally speaking, the preceding decade has not been without any pressures for the kingdom.



The influx of a large number of Syrian refugees and the subsequent closing of trade routes with Syria had negative repercussions on the Jordanian economy and put severe pressure on the Jordanian government's ability to provide social services (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018). On a diplomatic front, Jordan is increasingly becoming marginalized in terms of geopolitical influence. The increasingly public rapprochement between Gulf States and Israel (Galili, 2019) and subsequent deep freezing of Israel-Jordanian relations (Aftandilian, 2020) have left Jordan increasingly vulnerable, as the kingdom's geopolitical significance has long entailed it to benefit from foreign assistance. Should Jordan become inconsequential in terms of geopolitical significance, foreign assistance could potentially dwindle, a nightmarish scenario given the kingdom's reliance on aid.

ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The public sector in Jordan – from the civil service and the security apparatus, to municipalities and other public bodies – has long been the largest employer in the country. According to the 2016 Jordan Labour Market Panel Survey, 43 percent of Jordanians work in the public sector (Assaad & Salemi, 2018). Public sector jobs, which tend to be relatively well-paid and provide several benefits (such as access to health insurance and social security), have long been a means through which patronage is distributed.

Following massive riots in 1989 in areas considered the bedrocks of Hashemite support, which erupted over the lifting of governmental food subsidies, Jordan embarked on the path of neoliberalism and façade democratization whereby the parliament was reestablished and many restrictions on the freedom of association and freedom of expression were lifted (Jarrar, 2017).

Neoliberalization in Jordan cemented and augmented already-extant socioeconomic inequalities. The unemployment rate is very high, standing at 19 percent in the 1st Quarter of 2019⁷. Youth unemployment is at alarmingly high levels – reaching 37 percent in 2018 according to the World Bank⁸ – which is particularly poignant given the fact that “35.8% of the population is below the age of 15” and that over a third of the population belongs to the 12-30 age group (OECD, 2018).

Jordanian citizens have little trust in the legislative branch of government. The results of a poll from June 2018 undertaken by the Center for Insights in Survey Research widely confirms this low trust, as 72 percent of Jordanians stated that they have no confidence in the parliament and 60 percent believed that the parliament is not very effective⁹.

⁶According to the referenced study, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates together are home to around 68 percent of Jordanian expatriates (p.4).

⁷The figure was retrieved from the Jordanian government's Department of Statistics: <http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/>

⁸The figure was retrieved from the World Bank's website: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=JO>

⁹It is worth noting that the poll was undertaken only a few days after a series of major protests forced Prime Minister Hani Mulki to resign, which likely influenced participants' responses. Nonetheless, the results are revelatory as to the extent to which the public's trust in the parliament has sunk. The results can be accessed here: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018.11.6_jordan_poll_presentation.pdf

STATE OF THE MEDIA AND BASIC FREEDOMS: EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION

Since 1989 and the lifting of martial law, independent media outlets have mushroomed (newspapers, online news websites, satellite television channels, etc.). Criticism of the government is tolerated and common in both traditional media outlets and social media (George, 2005), and it is not uncommon to watch lively and heated debates on Al Mamlaka Television¹⁰ or Roya Television¹¹. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists generally do not face difficulties in having access to the media and in voicing their opinions and concerns, be it the print media, television or social media. Many of the activists and CSOs interviewed in the case studies to follow have previously penned op-eds, have active Twitter and Facebook accounts or have appeared on television.

However, there remain strict red lines that force journalists to practice self-censorship. Criticizing or mocking the king and the royal family is forbidden, as is criticizing Jordan's geopolitical allies, which could bring about hefty fines or prison sentences on the offenders¹² (Fanack, 2017). Instances of the security apparatus hacking online news websites have also been documented (Fanack, 2017).

In addition, freedom of assembly is a contentious topic as there are several restrictions. For example, as one of the case studies will showcase, establishing workers' trade unions is very complex, as entrenched business interests and the security apparatus view such efforts as a threat to Jordan's security and economic situation, and impose severe restrictions on workers in this regard.

THE STATUS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN JORDAN

Since 1989, CSOs have increased in number often providing services that were once provided by the state prior to the neoliberal reforms. CSOs continue to face legal and covert restrictions that hamper their maneuverability and ability to influence policy-making and enact changes in Jordan's sociopolitical and economic realms (Yom, 2009). For example, when it comes to attracting funding from foreign sources, CSOs need to "complete and submit [to the Council of Ministers] an extensive application form, providing detailed information about the source of funds and the project to be funded," which "must be accompanied by numerous supporting documentation" (ICNL, 2019). In this regard, CSOs face competition from the better-funded Royal-NGOs (RONGOs), which "enjoy preferential access to money and decision-makers" (Al Nasser, 2016, p.8).

In spite of this, civil society in Jordan has come a long way. The following case studies will show that on a wide range of issues, both sensitive and non-sensitive, CSOs have become active players in the Jordanian body politic, navigating the complex legislative process and pressure from the security apparatus to achieve concrete legislative and policy changes.

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¹⁰The YouTube channel of Al Mamlaka TV, containing an archive of the station's broadcasts since it was launched in July 2018, can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0jiFAzTgl17k7awGbuoYew>

¹¹The YouTube channel of Roya TV, containing an archive of the station's broadcasts since it was launched in January 2011, can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/RoyaTV/about>

¹²To illustrate the red lines, according to the referenced source, a journalist who penned an article criticizing Saudi airstrikes on Yemen in 2015 was sentenced alongside the editors of the site that published his article for several months under the guise of "insulting a foreign state".

BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid- 2018, the “Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World” program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project “Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making”. This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project’s goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media’s expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) is an independent, research-based, policy oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab region. The Institute is committed to expanding and deepening knowledge production and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society actors, and policy makers.

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