

Jordan: Revolutionaries without a Revolution

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Jordan: Revolutionaries without a Revolution

Contrairement à l'image très répandue d'un oasis de stabilité dans un Moyen-Orient conflictuel, la Jordanie a connu des soubresauts révolutionnaires il y a plus de vingt ans. Une analyse détaillée des transformations politiques, sociales et économiques observées en Jordanie indique que ce pays fut même l'un des premiers pays arabes à expérimenter un changement révolutionnaire « silencieux » car peu médiatisé à l'époque. En 1989, la Jordanie a ainsi connu ce qu'on appelle communément la « poussée d'avril », qui exigeait le combat contre la corruption, le développement des libertés et la limitation des pouvoirs du Roi. Vingt deux ans après cette « poussée », de nouvelles forces politiques (les militaires retraités, les tribus, la déclaration des 36 et le Mouvement de la Jeunesse en Marche) ont fait émerger des programmes de réformes politiques et économiques qui ont, dès novembre 2010, donné lieu à des protestations et des manifestations. Amorçées avant les révolutions tunisienne et égyptienne, ces mouvements demandaient le départ du gouvernement, la dissolution du Parlement et la mise en œuvre de réformes politiques.

La convergence de l'opposition traditionnelle (les Frères Musulmans, les nationalistes et des personnalités indépendantes) et de la nouvelle opposition (l'armée, les

tribus et la jeunesse) ne signifie pas, d'une quelconque façon, un « renversement du régime hachémite », mais plutôt sa réforme. Il semble que la nature tribale de la société, doublée de la flexibilité et de l'expérience du régime, lui a permis d'avoir une communication avec ces nouvelles forces « rebelles », ce qui lui a permis d'éviter une confrontation brutale.

One who follows the developments relating to political unrest and popular Jordanian economic and political demands will discover that these demands were previously made in Jordan in contrast with the demands of the peoples of the Arab countries which witnessed the revolutions of the Spring of 2011, and which, until this time, led to the demise of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes. Actually, Jordan experienced what is called the «surge of April» in 1989, which led to a democratic transformation¹. And despite the lapse of 22 years since that transformation and what accompanied it in terms of promises for reform, the Jordanian demands continued as they were initially: combating corruption, unleashing freedoms, and the limitation of the absolute power of the king.

Undoubtedly, the «traditional opposition» embodied in the Muslim Brothers (Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimin ar.), and some of the independent political personalities such as the prominent opposition figure Leith Shbeilat, the former Prime minister Ahmad Obeidat, the former member of Parliament Tujan Feisal, are the ones who championed popular demands in terms of intellectual aspects and in speechmaking, while the «rebellious forces,» to avoid using the term «revolutionary,» represented in the military retirees, and the important tribal figures (the group of 36), (and the 14th of April youth group), are the elements which appeared on the Jordanian political surface prior and during the Arab Spring revolutions.

The question that presents itself is : does the Jordanian opposition, in its traditional and modern wings, seek to topple the regime?

«The surge of April» 1989: The early launching of the Jordanian revolution

If the reality of the current Arab revolutions indicates that an awa-

renewal of the necessity of change has begun to sweep the Arab World thanks to the Internet communication revolution, satellite television, and cellular phones, the revolution of Jordanians, which was termed the «April surge» in 1989, came at a time when the modern communication means were non-existent².

Jordan experienced prior to these events a state of noticeable economic and social crisis given that some perceive that this crisis had a large impact on its democratic transformation³. Jordan is a poor country, which fact has caused it to rely since independence in 1946 on foreign assistance, which on the one hand created an artificial economy, and on the other prevented the Jordanian people from benefiting from it; for there developed huge class differences between extreme wealth and abject poverty⁴.

The demonstrations broke out on April 17, 1989 in the city of Ma'an, and a day after they started to spread to include most of the cities of southern Jordan to reach Karak, Tafleeh, and Salt. At the time of those events the departed king Hussein was on a visit to the United States of America⁵, and he returned to Jordan to personally intervene to calm matters down. The cause of the outbreak of those demonstrations is attributable to the acceptance by the Jordanian Government of the conditions of the World Bank in 1988, which led to a rise in the prices of food⁶.

The impact of these developments was considerable on Jordan and its democratic movement forward, for we find that the popular demands were not only economic but were also political; actually, respect for the individual and the right to freedom of expression were among the slogans of the demonstrators. Those events made King Hussein sense that the absolute support of the tribes which he heretofore enjoyed was not unconditional any more. Thus, he had to move swiftly in the shadow of a limited margin of freedom; there was no quick way to change the existing economic condition, and there was no escape from honoring the agreement with the World Bank, and so the only avenue before him was the political arena⁷.

Hence, Jordanians appeared more modest than the Tunisians and Egyptians by characterizing their «revolution» as a «surge» which took place distant from the cameras of satellite television, and social network connectivity, and international intervention. After six days from the outbreak of violent demonstrations, and 19 deaths and 200 wounded⁸, the king embarked on political reforms which exceeded, at the time, what the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have accomplished, at

least until now. He announced the dismissal of the government of Zeid Al-Rifa`i, the ending of martial law, and the return of democratic life to the country⁹.

Those who like the idea of comparing between the movements of 1989 and 2011, due to the fact that they do not differentiate between the two, find that the failure of the 80s movement is a substantive cause of the birth of the current movement¹⁰.

Jordanian popular demands prior to the Arab revolutions

The demand for dissolving Parliament in 2010, combating corruption, and political reforms were at the forefront of Jordanian popular demands, prior to the birth of the «revolutions» experienced by the other Arab countries in 2011.

Demand for dissolving Parliament 2010

Directly after holding parliamentary elections in November 2010 the Islamic movement represented by the Muslim Brothers stated that the House of Deputies which was elected «does not genuinely represent the Jordanian people»¹¹. Moreover, the elections were rigged as manifested in a number of documents which the Ikhwan presented to prove its position, considering what occurred as an extension of the rigging which took place in the parliamentary and municipal elections in 2007»¹².

The «dissolving of Parliament» emerged as one of the leading demands in the Friday marches which took place in downtown Amman. One of the demonstrators, Mr. Bassam Al-Jreibee`, told Al Jazeera Net, «I demonstrate to demand change, and we are calling for dissolving the House of Deputies which does not represent us»¹³.

What can be deduced from this political demand is that the dissolution of the House of Deputies 16, or what was called the House «111» due to having given a confidence vote to the cabinet of Samir Rifa`i by a majority of 111 deputies from 120 had stated prior to the occurrence of the Arab revolutions, and hence, one of the slogans of the demonstrators was «The solution is by dissolution»¹⁴.

Notwithstanding the impact of the Arab revolutions in meeting one of the demands of the Jordanians to bring down the Rifa`i government (his father Zeid Al-Rifa`i was toppled in the first confrontation with

the Jordanian people in 1989, and his son was also toppled through a confrontation like the first one) on February 1, 2011 and the formation of a new government by prime minister Ma`rouf Al-Bakhit on the same day¹⁵ 2011 while those revolutions did not succeed in bringing down Parliament.

Votes against «Protected Corruption»

Corruption is considered one of the prominent files which dealt fatal blows to the credibility of the Jordanian state during the previous years, which is the same file that a majority of Jordanians regard responsible for the various crises which they experienced such as the cases of the 'Casino», «Decent Housing for Decent Living» and «Aqaba port,» and it is for this reason that the government succumbed to the popular demand for establishing the «Anti-Corruption Commission» in 2007¹⁶.

The spread of corruption, despite the cluster of reforms which came after the April surge in 1989, is actually attributable to the fact that those reform clusters had pursued an erroneous path; for there is no genuine social reform if not preceded by constitutional reform at the level of freedoms, political participation, and the separation of powers. There is Jordanian awareness of this matter now¹⁷.

The saying «protected corruption» is widespread in the thinking of current popular movement, given that the Group of 36 which emerged in 2010 acknowledged that the «policy of suppression and political despotism and the fortification and protection of forms of corruption is still in existence where this approach and strategy has become known as (protected corruption)¹⁸.

The independent opposition figure Leith Shbeilat referred in a letter to King Abdullah II in February 2011 to the role of government in corruption by saying : «In 1994, I told Crown Prince El Hassan in an encounter broadcast on official television that corruption, your royal highness, is protected. What then do we say for 2011? Do you think that the people do not know?»¹⁹.

Seventy seven Jordanian personalities, headed by Mr. Ahmad Obeidat, former chief of Intelligence who was subsequently appointed as prime minister, addressed a letter to King Abdullah II in 2008 «warning of the economic and political policies exacerbating the condition of corruption.» And, moreover, the «policies and practices which were implemented over the past decade have led to the corrosion of the power base»²⁰. It may be said that the warnings of the independent political opposition figure Tujan Feisal was right when she described

the contents of the statement as the «smoke preceding the volcano.» Furthermore, Ms. Feisal told Al Jazeera Net «that the people know in detail the names and numbers of the corruptors but the problem lies in the leadership which continues its silence»²².

«Constitutional Monarchy:» Political Reform or Rebellion against the Government?

The demand of the constitutional monarchy that was anchored in the idea of limiting the powers of the king was an early Jordanian demand. In his famous letter to the king in 2011 Shbeilat states, «Since 1987 I started demanding the elimination of constitution disfigurements. However, my efforts met with failure»²². Mr. Shbeilat mentioned what he told king Hussein, «You must stand above everyone and be for all a symbol of sovereignty, the flag, the Constitution. Do not push yourself into situations of confrontation in favor of one group of citizens against another. The country can sustain and in a very healthy manner for prime ministers to be removed from power after they give what they have, but the country cannot sustain the change of kings»²³.

As for the Ikhwan Al-Muslimun which represents the political tendency with the greater presence and effectiveness in Jordan, it proposed through the Deputy Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front Mr. Irhil Gharaibeh in March 2009 to take the initiative to «establish an expanded national front to convert Jordan into a constitutional monarchy» during a symposium that was held by a research center in Washington. Gharaibeh had declared in his capacity as chairman of the follow up of the national reform initiative committee that around one hundred Jordanian national personalities have resolved to establish «an expanded national front that operates in an integrated manner to convert Jordan into a constitutional monarchy by peaceful and democratic means»²⁴. The Ikhwan subsequently retreated from this position, namely, the demand for a constitutional monarchy, and the limiting of the powers of the king, refusing to have a role in this statement²⁵.

The Rising Revolutionary Forces

There is a constellation of political forces which have started to assert themselves in the Jordanian scene in the shadow of the current political transformations. Hence, new forces have appeared other than the traditional forces representing the army, tribes, youth, and teachers.etc. An

analysis of these rising powers will help to understand the ramifications of the current popular movement, which are not necessarily liberation forces. The common denominator of all those forces is their position vis a vis corruption and political reforms, and the national identity, particularly in the shadow of the increase of the debt burden which reached 17 billion dollars, and an unemployment rate of 12.5%²⁶.

Military Retirees Committee

The sense of class inequality affected the group of «military retirees», a large number of whom formed a committee in 2007 that speaks on their behalf, particularly since their number reached 150 thousand military retirees²⁷. After the demands of this segment were purely economic they became of a political nature. Hence, it said the following in a statement, «The sense of grievance and oppression which the Jordanian citizen feels is totally unprecedented, for the Jordanian citizen does not possess any rights, given that medical treatment is a benefaction, food is an assistance, high cost education is a benefaction, housing is a benefaction, and clothing is an act of charity, as though the citizen lives as a serf in a feudal estate. We have the right to ask, «is not terrorism the legitimate product of oppression?»²⁸.

The Military Retirees National Committee issued its first statement on May 1 2010, linking in its statement between the concept of the «Jordanian identity» on the one hand, and achieving what is termed the «alternative homeland» and political corruption on the other hand. The statement declares: «The government has in reality embarked on adopting the quota system that is oriented towards the alternative homeland at the political and administrative levels, and this is manifest in the assumption of official and sensitive positions in the Jordanian state by those who do not merit (meaning Jordanians of Palestinian origin).» The statement emphasized that «The Jordanian Constitution does not grant to anybody, any powers except to his majesty without the partnership of any irrespective of kinship links or title (i.e. the queen)»²⁹.

To elucidate their vision for safeguarding the «national identity» they issued their second statement on July 8 2010 in which they stated, «Jordanians of Palestinian roots possess all rights in Jordan with the exception of political rights; so there should not be any quotas or naturalization, or political position, in order to safeguard the dear soil of Palestine»³⁰.

In order to highlight their opposition of cancelling the «Follow

up and Inspection Department» through which the differentiation between the Jordanian and Palestinian is effected, they issued a statement saying, «The Higher Military Retirees National Committee warns intensely the official quarters from taking such a decision, and in case the government does in fact take this decision the Committee will take other positions to protect the beloved homeland»³¹. Against the backdrop of this statement that is fraught with threatening which some saw as racist and which serves the institutions of corruption in the country, «around 300 military retirees addressed a letter to the king in which they denied that those statements represent their standpoint»³².

Nonetheless, this political movement, sometimes extremist, and under the pretext of «reform» is what drove former prime minister Ahmad Obeidat to issue a statement stressing national unity, and that there is no difference between the Jordanian and Palestinian identity, and that the vision of the military retirees is not the sound approach to confront the alternative homeland project»³³.

Group of 36

The second new element in the rebellious political forces is the «tribes» which represents 40% of the population of Jordan, and hence, those tribes have become, or at least a portion of them, outside of the boundaries of absolute and ordinary allegiance to the Hashemite regime. Actually, 36 personalities representing prominent Jordanian tribes issued a statement on 5 February 2011 in which they criticize the royal family, admonishing that the «Tunisian and Egyptian deluge will reach Jordan sooner or later, whether we wish it or not»³⁴.

The demands of this statement are encapsulated in three elements: combating corruption, political reform, and Jordanian and Palestinian relations, while it contains a pungent criticism of queen Rania without mentioning her by name, given that the statement says, «observing events in Tunisia and Egypt indicates that the suppression of freedom and movement, the plunder of wealth, the interference of Leila Tarabulsi and Suzan Mubarak in politics, and sponsoring corruption, and the infringement on dignity, are the main catalysts alongside other catalysts for those nations, and what Leila and Suzan did to these two states resembles the situation in Jordan. The Jordan situation and the queen's family and men and power centers that surround her plunder the country and people and differentiate between the sons and daughters of the same people»³⁵.

Notwithstanding the criticism targeting the queen who is of

Palestinian origin, some regard the attack as not necessarily targeting Jordanians of Palestinian roots but rather target specifically the lifestyle of the queen only³⁶. It would appear that this is to an extent accurate, because the Group of 36 is more concerned with corruption than with politics, which distinguishes it from the military retirees group; for it continually emphasizes the presence «of a crisis of plundering the resources of the homeland and the people at the expense of the hungry, widows, and orphans in the cities, villages, badia, and Palestinian refugee camps.» They also say, «We reject discrimination between Jordanian irrespective of their origins and roots»³⁷.

The printing of the statement of this group in AFP on 6 February 2011 through its correspondent Randa Habib evoked the displeasure of the Jordanian royal court which in turn issued a statement in which it said, «The reports broadcast by the Agency are based on rumor and hearsay, and are not based on any facts»³⁸.

24 March Youth Movement

The Jordanian 24 March Youth Movement is considered as one of the most important youth movements that have had a role in the Jordanian political arena through its participation in demanding reform and renewal on the one hand, and through going to the street to achieve those aims on the other. It would be possible to define the 24 March Youth Movement as a «peaceful movement organized by Jordanian youth of diverse roots and origins who love their country and homeland and wish to build and reform it. The Movement is not affiliated to any political party or particular quarter.»³⁹

The content published on Facebook by the Jordanian 24 March Movement could be considerably similar to the demands of the Egyptian Liberation Square youth notwithstanding the difference of venue. The goals of those youth may be encapsulated in the slogan «The people want to reform the regime» by means of: «A parliament which represents the people, an elected national government, genuine constitutional reforms, holding corruptors to account, reform of the taxation system, removing security oppression, and achieving national unity.»⁴⁰ It may be stated in this context that this Movement has become the most important among youth movements and the most renowned due to three reasons:

1. This Movement has proved itself as a new political force, relying on the Internet to effect social and administrative connectivity as well as organization just like the foremost contemporary Arab revolutions.

2. Due to its ability to organize a significant demonstration on the 24th of March at the Interior Circle (Duwwar Al-Dakhiliyya ar.) which is considered a strategic location in the capital Amman with the participation of tribal representatives and a number of military retirees in solidarity with them⁴¹, the Government and its security apparatus evinced apprehension and tenseness from turning the Interior Circle into a «new Liberation Square» like the Egyptian and Yemeni counterparts⁴². Thus, there was a harsh treatment of the partakers in the sit-in which led to the death of a citizen and the wounding of 150 others⁴³.

3. This Movement has garnered the substantial support of a number of Jordanian youth movements such as: 15 April Movement, Jordanian Youth Movement, and others⁴³.

Naturally, there are other movements and forces on the Jordanian scene, but they are of a special nature with limited demands and objectives such as the Teachers Union or «You have killed us» (Dhabahtuna ar.) which defends the rights of students in Jordanian universities, and hence, do not entail an expansive political and national dimension like the others⁴⁴.

The Jordanian Regime in Facing its Future

The nature of the Jordanian political regime, which is relatively more liberal than many other Arab regimes, let alone the nature of the Jordanian social system that is tribally based, renders it difficult to envisage Jordan as reaching a condition of revolution as witnessed by other countries such as: Tunisia, Egypt, and perhaps Yemen and Libya. It would appear that there is a collective sense on the part of a majority of the diverse segments of the Jordanian people who number around 6 million that the Hashemite regime is the «safety valve» for the survival and continuity of the Kingdom notwithstanding the presence of some excesses, here and there, in the leadership by the king of the state or of his entourage.

The regime, represented by king Abdullah II, contributed to defusing popular tension in his country, whose momentum increased against the background of the Arab Spring revolutions, by resorting to political solution, that is through «reform.» And in actual fact the king dismissed the government of Samir Al-Rifa'i and appointed Ma'rouf Al-Bakhit as prime ministers as a «start» to reducing the pressure of the Jordanian street, and subsequently met with leaders of the Ikhwan, youth, Jordanian tribes and others.

The fact is that the king did not stop at that, but embarked on forming two committees of a high degree of importance and that are intimately associated with the Jordanian protest movements demands, namely: the «National Dialogue» Committee which was formed on March 14 2011 of 52 Jordanian personalities representing the entire spectrum of Jordanian society «with a view to formulating ideas relating to promulgation of laws governing political activity, and Taher Al-Masri, Speaker of the Senate, was asked to be its chairman. The second was the «Reconsideration of the Constitution» Committee which was formed on April 24, 2011, and whose aim is to review the stipulations of the Constitution with a view to considering any constitutional amendments that are suitable for the present and future of Jordan, chaired by Ahmad Al-Lawzi, a former prime minister.

The foregoing notwithstanding, the possibility is considerable for the protests to continue, which would render the security and political situation in Jordan quite precarious, despite the «good intentions decisions» taken by the regime and its governments. We could overview some expected scenarios, precluding, naturally, the Libyan and Syrian security scenario due to the fact that the nature of the Jordanian regime is different from them, namely:

1. If the strikes and demonstrations continue this could lead to the loss of patience of the political regime, and to a change in its method of dealing with those demonstrations by forceful suppression. This could be precluded by the regime, especially since the experience of the «Interior Square» which led to a considerable tarnishing of the reputation of Jordan abroad, and because what happened was preplanned, as Ahmad Obeidat, former head of Intelligence, believes.

2. The «positive» dealing of the political regime with the demands of the people leads to the raising of their ceiling in the shadow of the successes of the Arab revolutions, which will place the decision maker in the problematic position of reconciling between acceding to the demands, and safeguarding the prestige and survival of the political regime.

3. There are many Jordanian forces, particular the «sons of the tribes» and the army, which reject tampering with the monarch's constitutional powers as demanded by certain other political forces, which could lead to a confrontation between those forces.

4. Exporting the crisis abroad by joining the Gulf Cooperation Council, which was news that was sudden and surprising to the Jordanian people and the peoples of the Gulf states when announced

on May 12, 2011. Should this materialize, this decision will be a direct consequence of the Arab revolutions which began to attack the bastions of the Arab regimes; for the Jordanian regime will secure immense economic support alleviating the economic crisis witnessed by the country, while the Gulf states will find in Jordan military and political support in facing the «new alliance» between Tehran and Cairo. Perhaps also, the Gulf states will need Jordan to face possible internal disturbances, not just politically, but also of a sectarian nature as in Bahrain, eastern Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

On the other hand, joining the GCC could lead to an attenuation of the idea of a «constitutional monarchy» demanded by the Jordanian opposition, which is something that the Gulf states do not favor for fear that it could become a «model» for the opposition inside those states. The final caveat in the joining of Jordan which is relatively advanced politically compared to the Gulf states, is that it will become, in one form or another, a part of the Gulf countries' regime; that is, its security and stability will be an internal policy for them, which means that if Jordan witnesses strikes or demonstrations negatively affecting the regime, it would not be ruled out for the Gulf states to dispatch its military arm «Al-Jazeera shield» to protect the Jordanian province: why wouldn't the Bahrain pattern of April 2011 be applied to Jordan in future to protect it by dispatching the Al-Jazeera Shield?

In brief, it may be argued that the Jordanian opposition forces of various forms do not aim to change the Hashemite political regime, but rather desire to reform it, which impels us to believe that what is happening in Jordan is no more than the movement of revolutionaries without a revolution ! ■

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