Jordan demands democracy, not disintegration

Jordan demands democracy, not disintegration

Mohammed Hussainy [1] 23 February 2011

Subjects:

- Constitutional reform [2]
- Civil society [3]
- Democracy and government [4]
- Tunisia [5]
- Egypt [6]
- Jordan [7]

[8] [9]

While Arabs express solidarity, the specificity of each nation must not be overlooked. In Jordan, Mohammed Hussainy pleads that this opportunity for reform is not undone by divisive agendas.

Amidst the jubilation and cheerfulness with which most Jordanians have greeted the triumph of the people in Tunisia and Egypt, we have to realise that Jordan is a special case; the ready-made experiences of other countries cannot be simply replicated in Jordan even if there are similarities in the political and economic demand for reform. Distinguishing Jordan, is a unique landmark - the country's peculiar social structure - that must not be neglected.

Like many other Arab states currently, Jordan has seen a rise in the level of protests demanding genuine political and economic reforms. The fact that such protests have coincided with events in Tunisia and Egypt has prompted many observers to predict that Jordan will be next in line to bring down its regime. Obviously, such projections were off track; it is Libya, not Jordan, that is closer to repeating the Egyptian and Tunisian scenarios.

In order to understand why Jordan stands out among other states in this regard, we have to look to the societal and political composition of this country. Such an understanding enables us to realise that regardless of the level of escalation, demands are unlikely to undermine the royal regime. This should not mean that there is no hope in bringing about genuine, radical and even constitutional reforms. On the contrary, those who have been closely following the unraveling of events in Jordan realise that a genuine course to reform has been already set, and that popular pressure will be the key engine that drives it.

The fabric of Jordanian society is complicated by its relationship with the conflict in Palestine. Jordan’s population is made up of a majority of Palestinian origin and Jordanians from Trans-Jordan descent who maintain a tribally-based identity, in addition to other ethnic minorities like Cercassians, Druze, Chechens, Armenians and Syrians.

The royal regime and family have for decades managed to maintain the balance between these different groups. Despite the fact that a complete democratic system is not in place, the monarchy in Jordan does not have a history of bloodily crushing the opposition in the way we have seen in neighbouring countries. The only exception in this case would be what happened in 1970 [10] when clashes between the Palestinian factions and Jordanian Army took place. Yet this armed clash cannot be classified as part of a standard policy of violent repression of the opposition, though it has had a long-term impact on domestic politics in Jordan, particularly with reference to security.

From my observations during the last couple of weeks, I have developed a sense of concern at

seeing some groups and individuals talking of replicating what happened in Tunisia and Egypt in Jordan. My fear is that they say so without giving due weight to the risks that such a course of events would have for social peace and stability in Jordan. I was concerned to find that some were ready to go to extremes without giving any consideration to the potential negative impact their actions might have on the Jordanian social fabric. Those who call for radical reforms should always consider communal security as an element that cannot be overlooked. Such reforms should boost and solidify Jordanian national identity and not prompt divisions and destruction.

Individuals and groups who hide behind the screen of reform and woefully preach of it should be exposed. Some call for reforms behind which is a regionalist agenda that would divide the community. Others use “reform” as a surrogate word for shares or quotas based on ethnic or regional grounds. In both cases, the reform called for is a “lame” reform – if it can be called reform at all, for I have yet to hear of a democratic system that is founded on the exclusion of others, or one that is based on assigning shares or quotas to each group in a negative way.

We should also warn against those demented individuals who are trying to undermine the country and its citizens alike, knowing that they represent no entity and have no political weight. However, their ill-motivated attempts to cause serious harm to the country and the people should not go unaddressed, for we have to expose them and their goals as having nothing to do with genuine democratic reform.

It is ironic, and indeed humorous, that some are trying to present themselves as champions of the people who want to reveal the truth, or pose as the oppressed who have been denied their rights. This attitude should not be bought by the people, and I tell such individuals that advocates of reform do not work by falsely accusing people and instigating rifts in society – our social fabric should not be a toy they play with and then break, whether by accident or design.

I challenge those who insinuate ill intentions on behalf of Queen Rania as part of their false allegations. I, among many others, know very well that such people do not represent any popular political movement – not even within the tribes they claim to represent. The statement [11] they have released aims at undermining our national unity and tries to revive an utterly rejected regional-based agenda (regional in the sense that it magnifies Palestinian vs. Jordanian strife). We know that they follow resented figures and individuals who are notorious for their ill intentions and affiliations no matter how hard they try to wrap their statements in patriotic terms. I also challenge those who falsely show sympathy for Jordanians of Palestinian origin in foreign newspapers, including Israeli papers; I very much doubt that they seek reform, for we know that they are after their own personal gain – even if it has to be done at the expense of national unity. Their allegations are unlikely to be heeded even if they are decorated in the language of human rights; for they are suspected of affiliation with extreme Zionist plans and designs.

Standing firm against such individuals can only be done via reform itself; it should be reform that sets citizenship as the foundation for participation separate from regional-based shares or quotas. It should be achieved through a national political process free from external affiliations or regionalist agendas; as for the various components of society they should remain as such – social but not political components of Jordan.

Since the beginning of the protests, the series of repercussions in the Jordanian arena has included many issues that are worth pondering. After the demands of the people to bring down Sameer Rifai’s government were met, an increasing level of pressure has created an atmosphere that will prompt the authorities to offer more concessions. Hence, many have taken advantage of the situation to ask for parallel demands that have nothing to do with the original calls for reform. A case in point would be the fact that one of the tribes has moved to claim their so-called “tribal entitlement to areas of land” which are basically state-owned but which some tribes claim ownership of on the basis of documentation issued by the Ottoman Empire. As the government succumbed to such demands, many other tribes followed suit and placed the government in a dilemma, for it has opened a door to demands that can never be satisfied, let alone that they have nothing to do with demands related to political reform.

We have to be mindful of the fact that any developments or actions taken without thorough

consideration might result in large-scale crises that would impede the reform process that citizens have been calling for. For example, the only given fact in the events of last Friday is that Jordanians expressing their demands peacefully were attacked and assaulted. Neither the government and Public Security Directorate's denial of involvement or protestors' claims that their attackers were driven by the security services are incontrovertible.

Naturally, the demonstrators and most observers will not be easily convinced that those who assaulted the participants were a bunch of "thugs" who decided to stop such demonstrations of their own accord. What further corroborates the rejection of such a claim is the fact that many similar examples have recently been seen in Egypt and Tunisia – which later turned out to be staged by the regimes and carried out by their thugs. Hence, it is the right of citizens who were beaten on Friday to think that what happened might not be that different of what was going on in Tripoli and Cairo.

By contrast, observers who have been following recent developments in Jordan will fail to find any logic or excuse for the government to perpetrate such an assault. When compared to other Arab states, the security agencies have refrained from coming down heavily or violently on demonstrations; the government has been keen instead to present the PSD as concerned with providing protection for demonstrators – they have offered them drinking water so as not to escalate things, for example. Hence, the government or the security agencies don't wish to blemish the picture of Jordan as more compassionate than its neighbours. If what took place on Friday was orchestrated by the government or security agencies, it could mean one of two things; the government has either decided to radically change its policy toward the demonstrators – quite a serious change of course, or a certain agency within the government has decided to act on its own without consulting other agencies – an equally serious case.

On aggregate, there is only one fixed fact that stands; demonstrators were attacked as they were exercising their constitutional right of the peaceful expression of their views. Regardless of whether the government was behind it or not, it is the government's responsibility to provide protection for its citizens. The government and security agencies should have protected the demonstrators against those "thugs".

Certainly, the ceiling for the reform demands has now been raised; what used to be admissible is no longer acceptable now. All of us now realise that attaining radical reforms has become inevitable for all, including the government. What remains to be agreed upon then is the pace and mechanism of these reforms. This might explain the way the steps of the Bakhit's new government were poorly received; amending the laws on elections, the right to association and free press are no longer the goals set. They have rather become mere steps en route to introducing radical reforms that cover a myriad of laws, rules and regulations, including some constitutional issues.

In his extended meeting with representatives of the three powers (executive, legislative and judiciary), King Abdullah II has emphasised that reform is "a popular best interest", and he addressed these representatives saying that "your responsibilities are great ones during these times; my hope is that all will work as one hand and one team in service of our people, address their needs and listen to and communicate with them. Our people's interest should be prioritised ahead of anything else. Our people deserves from us to be clear and frank about everything."

What is required in this respect is to invoke – but not to clone – what has happened in Tunisia and Egypt in a way that is aligned with our particular society. All national powers should be vigilant so as not to allow some voices here and there to catch a free ride while they lack any real alternative programme. Some are trying to impose unpatriotic agendas to exclude or increase certain groups' shares of power.

Change for the better is imminent; there is no way to go backward or keep things as they are. Jordan and its people deserve the best after they have proved that they are fully aware and cognisant of what they ask for. They have demonstrated that they are capable of understanding their needs, demands and goals best. They know more about the social, economic and regional considerations with which they have to work.

As a Jordanian citizen, I am proud of the level of awareness my fellow countrymen have shown as

they go about practicing their right to peaceful demonstration. However, I fear that some might endeavour to thwart what has been achieved as a result of their conduct or their attempt to carry out a totally rejected narrow-minded agendas. Hence, all patriotic powers that took to the streets should not allow those individuals to ruin this opportunity.

Decision-makers in Jordan should also realise the volume of responsibility they have; they should understand well that their actions and reactions will be delineating the course of events. The government should immediately be proactive and launch an overall comprehensive and time-bound reform initiative. Such initiative should engage political parties, NGOs and the media in a national dialogue with the goal of a consensual, comprehensive reform plan.
Country or region: Jordan
Egypt
Tunisia
Topics: Civil society
Democracy and government

$(document).ready(function(){ $("div#contentgrid").removeClass('grid-8');
$("div#contentgrid").addClass('grid-6'); }); About the author

Mohammed Hussainy is a Jordanian writer specialising in Iraqi issues who writes for the Arabic language Al Ghad [12] newspaper and Al Arabiya.net [13].

He is the director of the Identity Center [14] in Amman, Jordan, which aims to encourage political participation in Jordan and the wider Arab world.

[15]
This article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 licence. If you have any queries about republishing please contact us [16]. Please check individual images for licensing details.

Source URL:
http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/mohammed-hussainy/jordan-demands-democracy-not-disintegration

Links:
[1] http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/mohammed-hussainy
[2] http://www.opendemocracy.net/freeform-tags/constitutional-reform
[3] http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/civil-society
[4] http://www.opendemocracy.net/topics/democracy-and-government
[5] http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/tunisia
[6] http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/egypt
[7] http://www.opendemocracy.net/countries/jordan
[8] http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://www.opendemocracy.net/printpdf/58221&t=Jordan demands democracy, not disintegration
[9] http://twitter.com/share?text=Jordan demands democracy, not disintegration
[10] http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/images/jfq-55/25.pdf
[11] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/bedouin-accuse-jordan-queen-corruption
[12] http://alghad.com/index.php?auther=6746
[13] http://www.alarabiya.net/writers/writer.php?writer=420
[14] http://www.identity-center.org/
[15] http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/
[16] http://www.opendemocracy.net/contact