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**Unlike many of its immediate neighbors, the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan has since 1989 allowed for competitive elections, some level of pluralism, and the emergence of civil society. But for Jordanians who support the kingdom's liberalization process, the string of setbacks and disappointments in the liberalization process since the mid-1990's has become intolerable, with the postponement of national parliamentary elections providing just the latest example. This essay provides an analysis of Jordan's spluttering liberalization process, especially in the context of rising regional tensions.**

Jordan's King Abdullah II ascended the throne in February 1999 following the death of his father, King Hussein, who had ruled Jordan for the previous 46 years. Hussein had only sporadically supported very limited periods of political liberalization within the kingdom, but in 1989 he had presided over the most ambitious program to date. The process then, as now, was largely defensive and at all times cautious. Still, compared to many other countries in the region, Jordan's liberalization looked to be the most promising and the most extensive. Since its origins in riots and unrest triggered by International Monetary Fund austerity programs, Jordan's liberalization came to include the lifting of martial law, the legalization of political parties, loosening of restrictions on the media and three rounds of national parliamentary elections (in 1989, 1993, 1997). The fourth round of elections, however, did not take place as expected in November 2001. At the time, the regime postponed the elections allegedly due to a revised new electoral law that required a system of voting cards that could not be prepared in time. A more pressing concern, however, may have been the rising regional tensions resulting from the Palestinian uprising - the al-Aqsa Intifada which began in September 2000 - against Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

King Abdullah had dissolved the 1997-2001 parliament in June 2001, and then in July announced the postponement of elections for a new parliament. But the outgoing parliament had itself resulted from the controversial 1997 elections which were boycotted by 11 opposition parties. With most opposition candidates boycotting the polls, the resulting parliament had of course been quite pliant and pro-regime. Since its dissolution in July 2001, even that nominal alternative set of voices was absent from Jordanian political debates. The next parliament, should elections take place, can be expected to include far more opposition voices, including Islamists from the very well-organized Islamic Action Front, even with a balloting system that tends to over-represent more traditional pro-regime constituencies.

Still, expectations regarding new parliamentary elections have been repeatedly dashed. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the resultant increase in regional and global tensions, the elections were postponed once again. The government's official explanation remained focused on the technical complexities of the new electronic voter card system, but the elections, then expected in August 2002, never occurred. With the United States threatening war on Iraq, the regime postponed the election again until later in 2003.

Clearly external security concerns have added to regime-opposition tensions on this issue, but the monarchy is also concerned with internal opposition, especially over the possibility of

another US-Iraqi war. In recent unrest within Jordan, government forces battled militants within the southern town of Ma'an. The regime labeled its opponents "Wahhabis" - a word that has come to be a generic term for militant Sunni Islamists, but which more importantly implies that they are not really from Jordan. Similarly, civil unrest in Ma'an, in 1998, was blamed on secular leftists who were pro-Iraqi or perhaps even Iraqi agents themselves. In these and other instances, everything from local social unrest to actual militancy is blamed on various types of "outside agitators."

While militant Islamists did assassinate a U.S. diplomat in Amman in 2002, this remains highly unusual for Jordan. In the Jordanian context most opposition has been explicitly loyal, and indeed the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood have a long pattern of understanding between one another regarding regime loyalty and policy opposition.

This type of pattern was codified in the 1991 National Charter that set the stage for limited political pluralism and participation, but all within the context of loyalty to the Hashimite monarchy. The tensions between the opposition and the monarchy, therefore, turn not so much on the nature of the political system, but rather on profound differences regarding specific policy choices as well as the desired extent of political liberalization.

Thus, public anger over electoral postponements is part of the broader concern over unpopular electoral laws, renewed restrictions on the media and government bans on such democratic acts as public demonstrations. In terms of policy, the regime is intent on maintaining its 1994 peace treaty with Israel, as well as its intimately close ties and its foreign aid and military links to the United States and the United Kingdom. Both policy areas are increasingly unpopular within Jordan and have become sources of social unrest. Political parties and professional associations have repeatedly made clear their anger over Jordan's "peace" with Israel, while the Palestinian death toll mounts in the West Bank and Gaza and while Iraqi civilians suffer under the sanctions regime imposed on Iraq. While the regime has no intention of losing its peace treaty with Israel, or losing its vital economic and military ties to the U.S. and Britain, King Abdullah has nonetheless repeatedly made clear his opposition to both the sanctions regime and Israeli use of force against Palestinians. Within Jordan, however, the political opposition is as focused on reactivating the liberalization process as the regime is on internal and external security.

Jordan's electoral delays, therefore, must be seen not only in the context of a changing regional security environment, but also in the context of a broader liberalization beginning in 1989, and more importantly deliberalization as the earlier process began to backslide in 1994. At that time, King Hussein's regime showed little patience for opposition to the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty and, correspondingly, Jordan's "political opening" began to close.

The question of electoral delays, while important, is nonetheless not the core problem. Rather, it is a symptom of the broader crisis between the government and the opposition, and indeed between the regime and Jordanian society, over the entire political liberalization process. When King Abdullah first ascended the throne, Jordan's domestic and regional climate actually appeared to be remarkably stable and the King showed no hesitancy in allowing municipal elections to proceed apace in July 1999. It appeared that for the first time in years, the kingdom

might finally be able to move beyond its difficult geography and its various security concerns, to renew and consolidate liberalization at home, but since that time, regional and domestic security has dominated the regime's agenda. Since the second intifada began in September 2000, the Jordanian government has feared that Israel will expel thousands and perhaps even millions of Palestinians to Jordan. With the Intifada still raging, the U.S. war on Afghanistan (and the Jordanian regime's support for it) only widened the gap between the government and its opposition.

The regime's response has turned not just on electoral delays, but also and indeed mainly on its new campaign dubbed "Jordan First." This slogan certainly conveys the regime's nationalist approach and its intention to tolerate no exploitation of divisions within Jordanian society - whether between secularists and Islamists, or between Palestinians and Transjordanians. But the slogan has also been read by the opposition as either avoidance of commitment to broader Arab or Islamic concerns, or as a statement brooking no dissent, and hence no democracy, within increasingly security-oriented Jordanian politics.

Jordan has, until now, managed to avoid the Algerian model, in which democratic dissent was eliminated as a possible avenue for political expression, rendering violence the only means available to an increasingly radicalized and militant opposition. Jordanians suffered their own brutal civil war, between the forces of the Hashimite monarchy and those of the PLO, in 1970-71. No Jordanian wishes to repeat that horrible episode, nor is it terribly likely, but while the external security concerns of the regime are very real - with violence raging to the West, and war threatened to the East - the fact remains that the electoral delays and other forms of deliberalization have only undermined the regime at home.

There may be a lesson here from the last national elections. The 1997 elections were contested under a new, more restrictive electoral law, designed to contain the strength of the opposition. Instead, it united the opposition, triggered the 11-party opposition boycott and undermined the legitimacy of the electoral process as well as that of the parliament that resulted from it.

Jordanians now expect elections in 2003, with a new parliament to be seated (including genuine opposition voices) as quickly as possible. Then and only then will most Jordanians feel that the process is at last underway again, with much still to do particularly on the issue of full inclusion of women within Jordanian public life. For Jordan to avoid the fate of the many other garrison states of the region, the liberalization process must be renewed, even in a context of rising regional tensions, and perhaps especially so.

In 1989, when political liberalization first began in Jordan, optimistic advocates stressed the benefits of increasing pluralism, civil society and democracy within the kingdom. They also emphasized Jordan's potential role as a model for the rest of the Arab world. Since those heady days, disillusionment and bitterness have set in for many, but the process is not over. Even the "Jordan First" campaign has created committees drawn from key figures in society to examine issues such as fighting corruption, enhancing the roles of political parties, strengthening civil society and potentially creating a quota for women's representation. The question remains whether these committees are intended to contain participation, or to mobilize real participation and promote meaningful social and political change.

There is still time to retrieve and then deepen the process of real liberalization. That would make the domestic political climate more open to very vocal opposition, to be sure, but it would also enhance the more genuine security of state and society, of government and opposition, in Jordan. That can still be the legacy that King Abdullah ultimately leaves not only for Jordan, but also for the Middle East as a region.

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