

ARAB UPRISINGS, DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND THE UPGRADE OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN JORDAN

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Abstract

Despite the regional turmoil that was witnessed in parts of the Middle East and North Africa, the Arab monarchies have continued to be resilient. While the Arab uprisings shattered the dictatorial regimes of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen within a year, the Arab monarchies have been able to suppress the uprisings and ensure stability. This paper examines the impact of uprisings on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It also takes a look at different perspectives relating to the lack of democracy in Jordan and other Arab monarchies. The paper finds out that the happenings of the Arab spring in Jordan more or less did little in weakening the monarchical system but rather has led to an upgrade of the autocratic status where the powers of the monarch is not threatened but the strength and capacity of opposition groups is drastically reduced. Finally, it considers the upgrade of authoritarianism as the survival strategy of the monarch of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Key Words: *Arab uprisings, democratic deficit, authoritarianism, political reforms, monarchies.*

Introduction

Within the past few years, profound transformations on the social, political and constitutional fronts have been experienced in parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The phenomenon was given different names like the 'Arab uprising', 'Arab spring', 'Arab revolts' even 'Arab awakening'. The uprisings started on December 17th, 2010 when Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street

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vendor decided to light himself up in protest against the regime of President Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali. The young vendor was calling for an end to the endemic corruption, police brutality and seeking for political reforms in the country. This incident and later the demise of the vendor on the 4th of January led to a mass protest and demonstrations in Tunisia which eventually led to the overthrow and the fleeing of President Ben Ali from the country. The Tunisia events acted as a catalyst in other Arab countries. It led to protests, demonstrations in some countries. The uprisings in the Arab world saw the end of four dictators within a year (i.e. in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen). The toppling of the dictators brought about fear in Arab authoritarian monarchies. It pushed some of the monarchies (Gulf states) to resort to financial resources to calm the citizens, others opted for military assistance from neighbouring countries to suppress popular uprisings (Bahrain), while still others introduced some political reforms (Jordan and Morocco).

Since the uprisings, Arab monarchies unlike the Arab republics have not experienced a change in regimes. This has prompted extensively scholarly writings on the factors that have made the monarchies resilient. The discussion on the resilience of the monarchies is not new and has been studied by many scholars since the 1990s (Anderson, 1991; Herb, 1999; Lucas, 2004).

On a general note, authoritarianism in the Arab region has been in existence since the setting up of the Arab state system that came into being after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the defeat by Great Britain and France in the First World War. This collapse led to the creation of eight Arab states (Hooglund, 2014). The Ottoman Empire started losing control of its territory in the 19th century with France annexing areas in North Africa and Great Britain taking over areas along the Arabian Sea and the Persian gulf of the Arabic peninsula. The Arab states later became independent between 1945 and 1971 and remained under monarchical systems. There were no functioning democracies among the Arab states till after the 2011 Arab spring but for Lebanon that had a democratic regime for 30 years before the civil war (Barari, 2015).

Despite the fact that the scale of the protest in Jordan was not as large as that of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, it showed that it was not immune to the so called 'Arab spring virus' that affected other Arab nations. The striking difference of the Jordanian protest lies in the fact that while the Tunisians and Egyptians were

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calling for a change in government, the Jordanian were out for reforms. In fact, their demands were limited (Hamid & Freer 2011, p.4).

The protest in Jordan began on the 14th day of January, 2011 when people took to the streets to criticise the level of poverty, corruption and the lack of employment in major cities like Amman, Salt, Irbid, Maan and Karak. Central to the protests in January was the call for the resignation of the Prime Minister Samir Rifa'i which was led by the group known as "The Jordan Campaign for Change" (Jayeen). Other leftist parties and groups eventually joined the protest calling for political and economic reforms in the country (International Crisis Group, 2012). The coming together of different groups and oppositions to join the protest increased the number of protestors thereby putting immense pressure on the government. The political demands ranged from the need of a parliamentary political system with elected members as against the practice of the king appointing; freedom of expression, the independence of the judiciary and respect for the rule of law (Ryan, 2011).

It is an arguable fact that the uprising was the biggest threat to the throne of King Abdullah II since 1999 when he became the king. Yesilyurt (2014) asserted that Jordan is the most vulnerable of all the monarchies because of its small size, weak economy and its uneasy neighbourhood. Despite all the factors that make Jordan vulnerable, it has been able to maintain security and has been stable amidst revolutions and war that surround it. Since independence, the monarchy has been able to survive series of interstate war with Israel in 1948 and 1967; attempt of a coup d'état in 1950s as well as civil wars in the 1970s and the late 1980s (Yesilyurt, 2014).

The main thrust of this paper is to examine the impact of uprisings on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It also takes a look at different perspectives relating to the lack of democracy in Jordan and other Arab monarchies. Finally it considers the upgrade of authoritarianism as the survival strategy of the monarch of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It will use the Steven Heydemann's managing political contestation concept to analyse the upgrade of authoritarianism and persistence of autocracy in Jordan.

Contradictions on Democratic Deficit in Arab States

The issue of democratic deficit in the Arab states is not new and has constantly been argued by scholars. There are different and divergent views as to why autocracy has endured in the Arab world. Firstly, it is presented in the work of western scholars that the major factors that ensure the endurance of autocracy in the Arab states are Islam (as a religion) and the culture of the people. It is assumed that as a result of the commonness of values that are deeply instilled in religion and traditionalism, the Arab cultures exhibit a loathe to democratic tenets. That school of thought is known to be 'orientalism'. Orientalism is the approach in which scholars use in explaining the deficit of democracy in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The orientalist argue that the Islam is a religion that is highly incompatible with democracy as such democracy and its principle are strange and cannot be practiced (Said, 1978). Barari (2015) strongly argues that the orientalist basically sum this view from their implicit and essentialist assumptions that a monolithic religion and culture is shared by Arabs and Muslims in general and as such democracy is vehemently rejected by them. This orientalist's view is reflected in the works of scholars such as Lewis (1996) who argued that Islamic religion has a political tradition which for a long time has reflected command and obedience, which even modernity has not been able to weaken it but rather has seen it intensify. Even Huntington (1992) in the same vein considers the Islamic religion and the culture as the key factors that keep posing a challenge to democratic development.

However, it is clear going by the argument of Said (1978) in his criticism of the view by orientalist that the assertion that Arab societies are not flexible and cannot accept democratic change is not objective in any sense. Rather he conceives it as a desperate way by the orientalist to justify western domination.

Secondly, another key argument to explain the lack of democracy in the Arab world relates to socio-economic development. Scholars like Lipset (1959) in an attempt to explain the deficit of democracy in countries, emphasized that development in a country largely influences the prospect of democracy. Lipset argued that in rich societies where there is high quality educational system and urbanisation usually lead to an expansion of the middle class which in turn creates the necessary condition for social equality and mobility. He further argued that social equality and mobility are necessary conditions on which a functioning democracy can thrive. Also, Bellin (2011) argued that democratisation process is largely influenced by economic factors. She tried to

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show it through the concept of 'democratic paradox'. In her argument she places emphasis on the role of the middle class and an economically and politically free private sector which is not under the control of the state. The point of view of Bellin and Lipest, presents a vague view and rather shallow of the democratic deficit. Their views fall short of explaining the lack of democracy in the Arab world as the oil rich states in the Gulf are still autocratic.

Richards and Waterbury (2008) argue that rather than socio-economic developments, 'rentierism' is the main factor that explains democratic deficit and the society's relationship with the state. To them, the generated profit which is usually gotten from the sale of oil in the Gulf States is redistributed by the government using a strategy ensures that the elites (rentiers) continue to be powerful. They assert that for the fact that there has been oil for decades and the inflow of profits are high, citizens do not advocate for democracy as they are not heavily taxed and the government subsidizes many services.

The debate on monarchic exceptionalism emerged after the Arab uprising. While the experiences of the springs led to the ousting of authoritarian governments (in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt), Jordan, morocco and the Gulf States were able to manage the impacts of the spring in their countries (Yom and Gause, 2012). Attempts have been made by scholars to explain the resilience of the surviving monarchies. Yom and Gause (2012) argued that the main conditions that enabled the monarchs to be able to repress and withstand the uprisings include: i. the rents that are gotten from the revenues generated from oil empowered the Gulf States to adopt political strategies to hinder any mass opposition; ii. The opposition groups in the states did not enjoy the support of external actors from within and outside the regions; iii. The monarchs have had long-time alliances with the west which also helped to suppress the opposition from the inside and also the opposition groups in the states rather were after political reforms other than the overthrow of the monarchs.

The Upgrade of Authoritarianism in Jordan

The very first characteristic in the scale of upgrading authoritarianism to Heydemann (2007) is the managing of political contestations. In order to maintain and upgrade authoritarianism, the regime must demonstrate the capacity to handle and manage political competition (especially in a democratic structure). This is done through cosmetic reforms. In most cases, the reforms are

mostly electoral reforms which tend to mean a different thing to the outside world. Oppositions are tolerated in this instance but are systematically managed with a tight grip.

In Jordan, as a result of the pressure that was mounting, King Abdullah II had to give to the demands of the protesters by making The implementation of the electoral laws provided for a mixed electoral system and voters are provided with a vote for a district representative and a vote for a national-level list. So the voter can vote one time at the constituency level and another time at the nationwide level. Also, the number of seats for the House of Deputies was increased from 120 to 150. More to that, the reform gave room for the increase of seats occupied by women at the national level from 12 to 15 seats and the minimum age limit to be a candidate was moved from 35 to 25 years old.

As the pressure mounted, King Abdullah gave in to the pressures by calling for amendments to the constitution. As part of the political reforms, there were 41 amendments to the constitution, the establishment of a constitutional court and the institution to conduct elections under the newly installed Election body. Also, the electoral law that was long-criticized was revised in June 2012, the expansion of parliamentary roles and four Prime Ministers were dismissed overtime. It is necessary to note here that all the new changes still ensured the control of the state over decision-making process but it portrayed to the outside world that the transformations in the control were leading to a democratic political system. As part of the upgrade of authoritarianism, the laws provided in the constitution to regulate and prevents opposition are still very present. The parliament is a perfect description of a 'toothless bulldog' because they are more or less powerless in decision making; the decisions made by the King are final and cannot be altered.

Another very important factor of authoritarian upgrade could be seen in ties and diplomatic relationship established by autocrats. This is seen in the case of Jordan as well as Morocco. Jordan and the United States prior to the uprisings enjoyed a cordial relationship in general. However, as a result of the 'cosmetic reforms' that were implemented the bi-lateral relation between Jordan and the west improved as the west highly praised the efforts of the Arab monarchs aimed at 'democratisation'. By diversifying the diplomatic ties in Jordan, the authoritarian government since the spring has established trade and investment relations with other nations and international institutions. This has eminently

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reduced the pressure that used to be exerted on the monarchy by the western states as well as international institution. Jordan has also established ties with the gulf state and made it a key focus in terms or regional diplomacy. Through this activity, the state benefits from the huge capital that flows within the region from oil.

Conclusion

The factor that distinguishes Jordan from other Arab countries that experienced the Arab spring was the fact that the protesters in the country were rather seeking for political reformation other than questioning the legitimacy of the autocratic monarchical system in the country that has been in existence for decades. The Arab Uprisings shook the Arab monarchies and in the case of Jordan, the King was left with no option than to offer some form of a top-down and limited reform package that will not reduce the powers of the monarch. It is evident also that the reforms in the form of managing contestation have been able to weaken opposition groups while at the same time the monarch retains power. It is most likely that the autocratic model in Jordan will certainly prevail provided the main pillars that have contributed to its stability are still in place and unchanged. On a general note, the happenings of the Arab spring in Jordan more or less did little in weakening the monarchical system but rather has led to an upgrade of the autocratic status where the powers of the monarch are not threatened but the strength and capacity of opposition groups are drastically reduced.

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