



JUNE 2024

## Never waste a good protest

Examining the interplay between elites and social movements in Jordan

This brief offers insights into the bargaining process that both reflects and sets limits for political change in Jordan. It argues that neither permissiveness to organise protests nor their actual occurrence improves the prospects of meaningful political reforms. Instead, protests usually serve as a strategic tool in the interests of particular elites. In Jordan, elites and social movements commonly develop vertical ties instead of different social movements working together to press for change bottom-up, as is more usual elsewhere. Broadly, Jordan's political context makes it possible for elites and political authorities to co-opt social movements by supporting limited changes that respond to their demands, as long as these fit within the prevailing political settlement. Ultimately, protests tend to reinforce the status quo rather than challenging it. Social movements are therefore faced with the dilemma of accepting co-optation to facilitate incremental changes, or to stick to a more radical stance that risks being ineffective or even triggering repression. But mounting economic headwinds mean that some reform of Jordan's political system is inevitable if political instability is to be avoided. Mechanisms such as referendums and popular initiatives can provide a viable path forward if they are designed to operate on the frontiers of the existing framework and respect the position of the monarchy. Such initiatives can engage citizens more directly in reform processes and ensure their voices are heard in a more meaningful way. Jordan's dependence on foreign funding provides European policy makers with a lever to condition continuous support on steps in this direction.

### Introduction

Protests occur frequently in Jordan. According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), between January 2016 and January 2024, Jordanians took to the streets to assert their demands 2,401 times – on average, almost once a day. Most of these protests were local or confined to workers' organisations and featured only modest participation. However, there have also been larger events calling for far-ranging change that garnered significant national support. In September 2016, numerous

citizens took to the streets to protest against a government agreement with Israel to import an annual supply of 8.5 million cubic meters of gas. In 2017, nationwide demonstrations opposed new taxes on goods and services and called for the cabinet to resign. In 2018, thousands protested against IMF-backed austerity measures in anticipation of more taxation. 2019 featured successive teachers' protests and strikes for higher wages, and a two-year ban on the Jordanian Teachers' Syndicate.

In 2021, hundreds protested in Amman against a water-energy deal with Israel. In late 2023, many Jordanians took to the streets against the Israeli military campaign in Gaza.

Despite frequent protests over the past eight years, social movements have struggled to escalate their efforts towards achieving systemic changes. Instead, they have typically settled for limited reforms and the Jordanian political landscape has remained largely unchanged. To delve deeper into this dynamic, the brief explores the relationship between Jordan's politically relevant elites (PRE) and its social movements.<sup>1</sup> The aim is to scrutinise their negotiation dynamics and reveal how protests can inadvertently strengthen the status quo in the absence of functional legal and political channels to advance bottom-up calls for change. Beyond Jordan, this brief aims to enhance our understanding of the comparative lack of impact of protests in the Middle East.

The brief starts by describing the political context in which protests in Jordan take place in order to analyse the dynamics and prospects of those protests. The brief subsequently defines Jordan's politically relevant elite and social movements in terms of their composition and interests. Next, it explores how protests tend to work in a constrained political environment such as semi-authoritarian Jordan. Finally, the brief identifies the conditions under which the interests of elites and social movements can converge to translate demands into policy changes. It also examines what happens when such convergence does not take place. The brief closes with a few ideas on how meaningful transformation – understood here as political change beneficial to broad-based national interest – can be encouraged in a constrained political environment.

## Many protests, few changes: Understanding Jordan's political context

Protests in Jordan take place in a political space dominated by an alliance between conservative local powerbrokers and the monarchy, the latter of which holds the top position in the system. Both factors limit scope for more radical political changes that could accelerate Jordan's national development. As to the first element, the traditional local elite consists of influential families with a strong local powerbase, often including a strong tribal network. These families hold senior roles in the bureaucracy as well as in the security apparatus, and are traditionally supportive of the monarchy. This structure has remained largely intact despite the substantial demographic shifts the country has gone through over past decades, primarily as a result of waves of refugees from Palestine. Today, approximately 60 per cent of the population has ancestral ties outside of Jordan,<sup>2</sup> with over half of those originating from historical Palestine.<sup>3</sup> This influx of refugees has had a profound effect on the nation's social structure and economic landscape, but not its political arrangements of rule. For example, even in major urban centres like Amman, where a significant proportion of Palestinian and Syrian refugees reside, the urban population associates with the monarchy to varying degrees in terms of shared identity and economic ties.<sup>4</sup>

As to the second element, it is worth noting that Jordan is a *constitutional* monarchy mostly in name only. The king retains significant authority, including the power to dissolve parliament and change the prime minister. The Jordanian monarchy has deep roots going back to the country's establishment by the Hashemite family

---

1 The brief is based on insights from a literature review and 18 interviews that were mostly conducted in Jordan between 29 October and 4 November 2023 with researchers, political party leaders and policy makers. Thanks for review go to Arwa Shobaki, Managing Director, Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC).

---

2 Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations, Congressional Research Center. 2023.

3 Bauer, A. 2022. 'Jordan and the Palestinian cause'. October 2022, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

4 Schwedler, J. 2022. 'Protesting Jordan Geographies of Power and Dissent'. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

in the aftermath of the Great Arab Revolt of 1920. During that period, Bedouin tribes, particularly those from the south, played a pivotal role in securing the country's independence. This has formed Jordan's foundational narrative, emphasising the alliance between its original inhabitants and the Hashemite family. The divide between individuals whose family roots can be traced back to the historical tribal territory of Jordan and those with origins elsewhere is traditionally known as the distinction between East-Bankers and West-Bankers. Historically, East-Bankers have perceived themselves as the backbone of the monarchy and supply most of the country's political elite.<sup>5</sup> Even today, some members of this group view those they do not consider to be fully Jordanian as outsiders and position themselves as 'true Jordanians'. At times, this outlook fosters a sense of exclusion among West-Bankers and perpetuates societal disparities. This division has also manifested itself in the occupational landscape, with East-Bankers having predominantly occupied key roles in the public sector, especially the army and secret services,<sup>6</sup> while West-Bankers have been more dominant in the private sector.<sup>7</sup> In the main, East-Bankers still tend to live in small cities and the countryside. West-Bankers are more concentrated in Amman and other major cities.

However, these social and territorial boundaries have become less clearly delineated with the passage of time. Inter-community marriages have become more common and urban identity has evolved into a more cosmopolitan blend. Queen Rania, who hails from a Palestinian background herself, has played a visible public role in this regard, which has occasionally stirred resentment among some traditional

East-Bankers.<sup>8</sup> In the background, longer-term trends are slowly shifting the makeup of Jordan's political, economic and social elites away from individuals whose status is primarily determined by ancestral origins to individuals who are successful professionally and enjoy substantial financial standing. One consequence has been that East-Bankers have come to fear a decline in their influence and prestige, especially in political power broking circles. Such fears are not entirely unfounded, as privatisation has allowed some West-Bankers to increase their economic power and gain influence in the political arena. In particular, successful entrepreneurs with Palestinian roots have made inroads into Jordan's system of rule, even with the implicit endorsement of the monarchy. While West-Bankers have habitually been more supportive of social movements and protests advocating for reforms, since they aspire to a more pluralistic society in which they have more possibilities, over recent years East-Bankers have also increasingly joined protest movements. However, they have done so to maintain aspects of the status quo, preserve a high level of public expenditure and safeguard local ownership in decision-making processes.

### Why protest when little changes? Power dynamics in Jordan

In Jordan, protests are a primary method for the population to address the political authorities, orchestrating a public and visible display of grievances that seeks to hold those in power at least somewhat accountable. Such protests do not necessarily threaten the country's political system since its political elites often view them as opportunities to identify grievances and take pre-emptive actions to retain power and legitimacy. This also enables them to use methods other than outright repression.

---

5 Helfont, S. and Helfont, T. 2012. 'Jordan: Between the Arab Spring and the Gulf Cooperation Council', *Orbis*, 56 (1), 82-95.

6 Caper, G. 2018. 'Public Sector Isolation: Labor Market Divisions in Jordan'. *Journal of Public and International Affairs*. Princeton, NY: Princeton University.

7 Peterson, N., Rieger T. and Astorino-Courtois, A. 2020. 'Potential Paths to Instability in Jordan', NSI Reachback Report.

---

8 Haaretz, 2011. Jordan Tribes Threaten Revolution Over Country's Palestinian Queen Rania, 8 February: <https://www.haaretz.com/2011-02-08/ty-article/jordan-tribes-threaten-revolution-over-countrys-palestinian-queen-rania/0000017f-f7eb-d2d5-a9ff-f7ef41630000>.

For example, co-opting protest leaders through appointments in public institutions can turn protester demands into toothless policies. Approving symbolic changes via a cooperative parliament or establishing commissions to formalise protest demands into law can buy time and mitigate radical calls for change. Verbally endorsing protests or adopting a wait-and-see stance enables Jordan's elites, the monarchy included, to sidestep difficult decisions while maintaining their grip on power.

In a sense, protests serve as a weather vane for Jordan's politically relevant elites, particularly the monarchy. They bring popular concerns to their attention and enable proactive measures to be taken before demands radicalise. In consequence, protests can present opportunities to advance political changes that ultimately strengthen the monarchy's power. As one respondent pointed out, 'allowing certain protests makes it possible for the monarchy to identify who upcoming social actors are'.<sup>9</sup> In addition, politically relevant elites may even use protests as a platform to express their own discontent and demand policy changes that are aligned with their interests. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood is believed to have a strong influence over several associations of public workers, including teachers, and has supported demands to improve their working conditions to increase its influence.<sup>10</sup> The Brotherhood is also seeking to capitalise on the widespread outrage over Israel's military operation in Gaza, leveraging its ideological links with Hamas.

Should protests and social movements lead to the emergence of new political parties, Jordan's electoral process and legal and institutional impediments make it challenging to translate this into political representation. Turning public discontent into viable, alternative policies is also hard because it requires support from the politically relevant elite. This group encompasses 'individuals, groups, and networks in a given

country who wield political influence and power, make strategic decisions or participate in decision-making at a national level'.<sup>11</sup> These individuals risk losing much in a regime change scenario and are often willing to provide authorities with the necessary political and economic capital to address protest demands or co-opt protest leaders. Protests in Jordan also play a key role in intra-elite competition because they can bolster rivals within the politically relevant elite. It is a low-risk strategy for elites to align with demonstrators or endorse their demands, as long as they do not call for system change. If protest is successful, they stand to benefit from new policies implemented in response; if it goes poorly, they often do not face significant political consequences. Therefore, it is not uncommon for elite members to make public statements, donate to social movements or convey their concerns to the political authorities. In exchange, they seek to influence and co-own or co-opt protesters' demands.

Relations between social movements and the politically relevant elite can acquire three main modes of interaction: *non-cooperation*, *strategic cooperation* and *co-optation*.<sup>12</sup> Non-cooperation occurs when there is a divergence of interests between social movements and powerful elite members that can result in repression. Co-optation and strategic cooperation occur when there is some degree of alignment between the interests of elites and those of social movements. This is usually the case when elites view the emergence of a social movement as an opportunity to gain support for a political decision or reform that they favour, but for which they have so far been unable to gather sufficient support themselves. However, these two dynamics differ significantly in terms of power dynamics and objectives.

9 Interview with Benjamin Schuetze, Senior Researcher and Emmy Noether Junior Research Group leader, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI).

10 Interview with a PhD Candidate, expert on Jordan.

11 Perthes, V. 2004. 'Arab elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change', Boulder CO and London, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Bayat, A. 2021. 'Revolutionary life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring'. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 26.

12 Holdo, M. 2019. 'Cooptation and non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest', *Social Movement Studies*, 18 (4), 444–46.

Co-optation occurs when the protest movement has little to offer to elite members except boosting their legitimacy and public image. In these cases, elites maintain the upper hand, aiming ‘to channel the energies and angers of the protesters into more legitimate and less disruptive forms of political behaviour’.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, strategic cooperation arises when the social movement has relative strength of its own and significant change cannot occur without its capacity to mobilise citizens. In these cases (segments of) the political elites ‘encourage and support the formation of an independent field of activism and help maintain its sense of independence’.<sup>14</sup>

Of these three modes, co-optation best characterises relations between elites and social movements in Jordan because the legal and institutional framework prevents the formation of national social movements. Civil society organisations are often fragmented, local and with few members. This skews the power distribution in the elites’ favour. It is thus to the advantage of protesters to do deals with segments of the politically relevant elite as it allows them to make their claim more visible and obtain support and resources. In exchange, elite members instrumentalise protests to increase their influence.<sup>15</sup> This marriage of convenience hinges on the condition that protest claims are not systemic and that changes can be secured through the country’s existing institutional frameworks. Unsurprisingly, this tends to exclude broad, fast or radical political change. However, without the backing of the elite, social movements run the risk of irrelevance or, worse, repression.

## Who are the elite? Power in Jordan

The power structure in Jordan has the monarchy firmly ensconced at the top. The king acts both as mediator between divergent interests and holds the final authority over crucial decisions. Although the king’s position remains largely unchallenged, intense competition occurs among members of the politically relevant elite for influential positions, power and privileges. The composition of this powerful group reflects Jordan’s history. In interviews, respondents routinely identified four key subgroups: (1) current and former ministers and members of the Senate,<sup>16</sup> (2) senior commanders of the security apparatus, (3) tribal leaders and (4) the business elite.

The first group encompasses a network that includes ‘technocrats and members of influential elite families’,<sup>17</sup> specifically those ‘East-Bank families that have been recycled through various ministries and the office of the prime minister’,<sup>18</sup> such as the Tarawnah, Attiyeh and Khasawneh families. Many of these families rose to prominence by leading the 1920 revolt against the Ottomans and have produced several high-ranking state officials throughout Jordan’s history. Over time, they have leveraged their position to build local fiefdoms in the form of local constituencies or significant business interests centred on their respective cities or regions. Consequently, the monarchy views them as the linchpin of its power, often turning to them to address local issues and grievances. Some respondents believe that this subgroup – and the network it represents – is key in steering the country’s political development, even when they do not hold official positions. They regularly meet informally to discuss political issues and influence current policies. Additionally, individuals within this network of powerful families are noted to ‘rotate in and out of the

13 Piven, F. and Cloward, R. 1979. ‘Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail’. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 30 cited in Lapegna, P., 2014. The problem with ‘cooptation’. *States, Power and Societies*, 20 (1), 7–11. LBJ Presidential Library.

14 *Ibid.*, 452.

15 Lust-Okar, E. 2006. ‘Elections under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan’, *Democratization*, 13 (3), 456–471.

16 The Senate is the upper chamber in the Jordanian political system. Its members are appointed by the king. This institution has veto power over legislation.

17 Interview with Arwa Shobaki, Managing Director, Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC).

18 *Ibid.*

Senate, in and out of cabinet positions, and in and out of advisory boards or special panels or national dialogues'.<sup>19</sup>

Senior commanders of the security forces, in particular the director of the General Intelligence Directorate, are also frequently cited as significant power brokers in Jordan. One respondent emphasised that 'when it comes to sensitive decisions, it's always the royal court and the security apparatus that take centre stage'.<sup>20</sup> The monarchy is keenly aware of the need to maintain the latter's favour, as discontent among the armed forces poses a great risk to any regime. Some political movements view the prominent role of the security forces as a major impediment to a fair and open political environment. One of the leaders of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) party argued that this component of the elite 'is decisive in determining acceptable limits to the demands of demonstrators in Jordan'.<sup>21</sup> For example, he points out that 'the General Intelligence Department has a role in suppressing protests and designating only a limited set number of locations where demonstrations can take place, and this is an infringement on freedom of opinion'.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, he highlights that 'this type of elite ultimately gives priority to maintaining their loyalty to the monarchy rather than the Jordanian population'.<sup>23</sup>

Tribal leaders similarly represent a vital subgroup of the Jordanian elite, especially in the country's southern and eastern regions. A respondent highlighted that 'tribal affiliations remain crucial, and leaders with strong ties to prominent tribes can gain political prominence'.<sup>24</sup> For instance, tribal networks

serve as a significant electoral base, enabling prominent families to secure parliamentary seats. The significance of these networks was evident even in the most recent elections. Urban districts of Amman reported remarkably low voter turnout rates, some as low as 10 per cent. In contrast, in more rural districts with a robust tribal presence the turnout was notably high, reaching 64 per cent in Uhud and 57 per cent in Bader Al-Jadidah.<sup>25</sup> Tribal networks also play a crucial role in shaping local responses during protests or crises, often serving as intermediaries between the government and citizens. While many young Jordanians may view their tribal affiliations as less relevant than their parents, this political capital can prove influential during times of tension. For instance, tribal leaders successfully arranged a meeting with the king in 2022 to advocate for the release of arrested activists.<sup>26</sup> Such a meeting would be difficult for ordinary Jordanians to achieve. Finally, tribal influence can also be exploited in reverse, as the monarchy may use tribal leaders to mobilise their networks to quell protests in rural areas.

The business elite, consisting of bankers and individuals with substantial investment portfolios, wields increasing power.<sup>27</sup> One respondent emphasised that they 'affect the rules directly and have a direct impact on the decision-making process, or indirectly through parties they support'.<sup>28</sup> Another respondent, argued that during the Covid emergency, legislation was tailored to their needs at the expense of workers' rights, showcasing their influence.<sup>29</sup> Their political clout manifests in various ways.

19 Interview with Jillian Schwedler Professor of Political Science, City University of New York's Hunter College and the Graduate Center.

20 Interview with a Civil Society Leader, Jordan.

21 Interview with Mohamed Awaidahe, Spokesman of the Islamic Action Front.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 Interview with Omar Shoshan, Chairman of Jordan Environmental Union.

25 Bani Salameh, M. T. and Aldabbas, K. M., 2023. 'Electoral districts' distribution in Jordan: Political geographical analysis', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 8.

26 Ersan, M., 2022. 'Jordan's tribal leaders take aim at King Abdullah II', 11 July: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-tribal-leaders-anger-king-abdullah>.

27 The business elite can be broken down into West-Bankers and East-Bankers, with interesting political dynamics between them and in relation to vested interests. For reasons of complexity and space, the brief does not take this issue into account.

28 Interview with Wael Khatib, PhD Candidate, Ghent University.

29 Interview with an Expert, Jordan.

For example, the proportion of businesspeople in parliament has doubled under King Abdullah II compared with King Hussein's era, rising from 7 per cent to 14 per cent, with a peak of 30 per cent between 2016 and 2018.<sup>30</sup> Figures like former senator and current mayor of Amman Omar Ma'ani, who also chairs the construction group Maani Ventures, and former finance minister Omar Malhas, who worked at Al-Amal Financial Investments, are just two of many examples illustrating the blurred lines between business and politics.

Business associations and royal committees also serve as centres of power for the business elite. An example is the Economic Consultative Council (ECC) which was established in 1999 and serves as a platform for Jordanian political and economic elites loyal to the current king.<sup>31</sup> This council consists of influential entrepreneurs and offers policy recommendations to the government that are sometimes adopted without sufficient parliamentary oversight of the legal process.<sup>32</sup> Respondents stressed that there is also another group of businesspeople that is ideologically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and should be considered as part of the business elite since it holds significant economic power in the country. However, these businesspeople also serve an Islamist agenda, which can differ from that of other members of the business elite circles.

These four distinct subgroups of the Jordanian politically relevant elite, however, also have divergent interests that occasionally lead to intra-elite conflict (see *Table 1 below*). Internal discord can even pose a threat to stability and potentially challenge the authority of the king. A notable example includes the recent support from certain elite members, predominantly East-Bankers, for Prince Hamza bin Hussein, the half-brother of King Abdullah, who is currently under house arrest due to allegations of corruption and disobedience against the country's leaders.<sup>33</sup> Identity, political, institutional and economic interests are key cleavages within the elite. Concerning identity, there is a divergence in perspectives on the country's present and future. The business elite generally advocates for a cosmopolitan and mercantile identity for Jordan, favouring the free movement of goods and people. In contrast, the security apparatus leans towards a strongly nationalist viewpoint, prioritising national security. Tribal leaders are also part of the politically relevant elite, and add a hyper-local focus that emphasises the need for policies to support rural communities. Such identity divisions extend into politics. The urban business elite aspires to a pluralistic and dynamic political system whereas all other subgroups of the elite aim to preserve the existing institutional framework with a strong emphasis on local ownership. Economically, the divide is manifested in a preference for a robust public sector among elite subgroups like senior commanders and tribal leaders, in which resources are allocated to security forces or tribal clienteles, as opposed to the business elite advocating for lower taxation and reduced public spending.

---

30 Aledwan, K. I., Bani Salameh M. T and Shdouh, E., 2018. 'Elite Circulation Case Study of the Jordanian Parliament', *Dirasat, Human and Social Sciences*, 45 (4).

31 Aledwan, K. I., Bani Salameh M. T., Shdouh, E. 2018. 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism' and Youth Empowerment in Jordan', *Dirasat, Human and Social Sciences*, 45 (4), 266.

32 How Neoliberalism Comes to Town: Policy Convergence, (Under)Development, and Jordanian Economics under King Abdullah.

---

33 Interview with Arwa Shobaki, Managing Director, Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC).

**Table 1** Key components of Jordan’s politically relevant elite

Elite subgroup	Main interests	Political influence <sup>34</sup>
Current and former ministers and Senate members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Defend the interests of their electoral constituencies</li> <li>– Maintain the existing institutional framework, including electoral laws, to preserve their authority</li> </ul>	Medium-High
Senior commanders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Advocate for a sustained level of public expenditure to support security forces</li> <li>– Implement security policies to maintain veto power over political decisions</li> </ul>	High
Tribal leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Advocate for the interests of their community</li> <li>– Uphold their decision-making authority at local level</li> </ul>	Medium
Business elite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reduce taxes on businesses and private citizens</li> <li>– Obtain opportunities in lucrative economic sectors</li> </ul>	Medium-High

### Embracing Protests? Up to a point...

Jordanians enjoy a relatively secure space for expressing dissent. As in many democratic countries, its political authorities only use violence to repress protests as a last resort. As one can observe during recent protests, members of political parties – and even the monarchy – sometimes express support or understanding for those in the squares. In terms of demands, demonstrators are free to articulate a broad range of issues. But the political authorities do set a few boundaries. First, targeting the monarchy or its key allies, such as Gulf countries, is not tolerated. Second, radical questioning of the official narrative that underpins Jordanian statehood is also out of bounds. Third, the security forces discourage the simultaneous occurrence of protests or occupation of particular spaces with the aim of preventing escalation.<sup>35</sup> For instance, in 2016, the authorities suppressed a local protest in Madaba that called for more employment opportunities and condemned corruption because activists had set up a tent in the city’s main square that acted as a road block.<sup>36</sup>

Holding a protest is relatively straightforward in Jordan, but translating protest demands into policies is a much trickier undertaking. Even if protesters work with supportive individuals of the politically relevant elites, or work through existing political parties, the setup of government decision making is stacked against them. The primary obstacle is the dominance of the Senate over the house of representatives in Jordan’s bicameral system. The Senate is composed of 65 members appointed by the king who often hail from elite families. Senators obviously lack any incentive to propose legislation countering the interests of the monarchy and the politically relevant elite. Also, bills require approval from both institutions and ratification by the king. Therefore, the Senate, whose members possess significant veto power, has the capacity to impede legislative progress initiated by the parliament.<sup>37</sup> This poses considerable challenges for policy makers proposing substantial national legislation, such as comprehensive reforms to electoral districts to better reflect the current demographics of the country, thus making voting more representative of the citizens’ will. Members of the House of Representatives,

34 Informed assessment by the author, based on interviews and the literature reviewed for this brief.

35 Schwedler, J. 2022. ‘Protesting Jordan. Geographies of Power and Dissent’. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

36 Ibid, 213–214.

37 Al-Momani, M.; Al-Adwan, K.; Bani S., and Torki, M., 2021. ‘The Evolution of Jordan’s Parliamentary Institution and the Impact on Political Reform: A Critical Review’ Association of Arab Universities Journal for Arts 11, (2) :18 : مجلة اتحاد الجامعات العربية للآداب : and Interview with Benjamin Schuetze, Senior Researcher and Emmy Noether Junior Research Group leader, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI).

therefore, often prioritise delivering government services to their constituents,<sup>38</sup> viewing their role primarily as redistributing state resources through clientelist channels.<sup>39</sup>

The situation is made more complex by an electoral law that favours tribal districts in representational terms, securing core constituencies for the monarchy. Seats in some tribal districts have been won with just over 2,000 votes while Amman's second district has almost 450,000 voters and only six representatives.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, politicians and power brokers with entrenched support in rural districts enjoy an unfair competitive advantage over their urban counterparts in terms of representativeness. Conscious of the weakness of the House of Representatives, a respondent pointed out that 'the monarch leads the reforms project instead of parliament.'<sup>41</sup> Notably, in 2021, the king appointed a 92-member Royal Committee to Modernise the Political System. This committee was not composed of staunch royalists but instead assembled political activists from diverse ideological backgrounds. These included reformists advocating for a more pluralistic political system, members of social and political movements critical of the government, such as the IAF, and members of leftist and liberal movements.<sup>42</sup> The committee was tasked with proposing new election and political party laws<sup>43</sup> with the aim of encouraging more active

participation in public life<sup>44</sup> and has achieved some reforms, such as lowering the minimum age for parliamentary candidates from 30 to 25 years. However, it has faced challenges in implementing broader and deeper changes. This is because its role remains advisory, lacking the authority to independently implement political changes without the approval of the monarchy. Consequently, its initiatives are predominantly top-down and constrained in their scope. Despite the sincere reformist outlook of committee members, this initiative primarily provides the monarchy with a platform to appear reformist without directly addressing grassroots demands that could diminish the power base of the politically relevant elite. As a result, a significant gap exists between the committee's actions and the comprehensive transformation sought by those advocating for meaningful political reforms.

The lack of fair electoral representation, resulting from the unfair distribution of seats under the electoral law, leads to significant disenfranchisement among voters, especially in urban areas. Furthermore, the current political system, which limits the House of Representative's ability to initiate comprehensive and long-term reforms, contributes to a sense of frustration within segments of Jordanian society. This results in national development being stuck in a holding pattern that maintains the status quo.<sup>45</sup> In such a context, protests have become the primary avenue for citizens to demand change. Elite members do not inherently oppose social movements as long as they stay within established boundaries. While members of the elite strive to maintain the institutional status quo that secures their positions, they have some room for manoeuvre in intra-elite competition for power. Respondents consulted for this brief highlighted several recent instances where the politically relevant elites and even the monarchy had endorsed protest demands, starting with simply enabling them. As a respondent noted,

38 Kayyali, A., 2020. 'Jordan's stubborn insistence on "business as usual"', Sada Journal Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2020, 13 November: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83232>.

39 Lust-Okar, El., 2006. 'Elections under authoritarianism: Preliminary lessons from Jordan', Democratization, 13 (3).

40 Karmel, E.J. and Linfield, D. 2021. 'Jordan's Election Law: Reinforcing Barriers to Democracy', Middle East Law and Governance.

41 Interview with Bashar Al-Khatib, Jordanian expert.

42 Yom, S. and Al-Khatib, W., 2022. Democratic Reform In Jordan Breaking The Impasse. Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) February 22: <https://pomed.org/publication/report-democratic-reform-in-jordan-breaking-the-impasse/>.

43 Al Sharif, O., 2022. 'Jordan takes a small step towards political reform, but at a hefty price': <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/hefty-price-political-reform-jordan>.

44 Interview with Wael Khatib, PhD Candidate, Ghent University.

45 *Ibid.*

‘when people take to the streets, it is because security forces allow it.’<sup>46</sup>

More substantive examples also exist. For example, during the tax-related protests in 2014 and 2018, the king himself encouraged people to advocate for bottom-up change to government policy to complement a similar push for change from the top that included business elites.<sup>47</sup> The aim was to show the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that its policies do not enjoy popular support and to obtain a different arrangement. It was a clear case of the monarchy using protests to hamstring an external demand based on a shared interest. These particular protests centred on the government’s agreement with the IMF to implement austerity measures, including a tax hike for employees of 5 per cent and for companies of 20 to 40 per cent.<sup>48</sup> The protests served the interests of both the people and the monarchy by signalling that the demands required by the IMF were unattainable. The protests also led to the appointment of a technocrat, Omar Razzaz, as the new prime minister, who was tasked with bridging the gap.<sup>49</sup>

In certain instances, co-optation has led to a profound transformation in the nature and composition of a social mobilisation, turning a demand for change into a public display of support for the monarchy. This was the case with the campaign against the so-called crime of honour (law 308), which stipulated that a rapist could be spared prosecution if he married his victim.<sup>50</sup> Initially, this movement was grassroots-driven, with numerous left-leaning

civil society organisations spearheading efforts and gathering thousands of signatures against the law. These organisations organised a march to present the signatures to parliament, but were denied a permit. Subsequently, activists sought assistance from Queen Rania to advocate for legislative change. Her endorsement of the campaign enabled the march to proceed, although the date was set in a top-down manner. According to reports, new participants who had not previously engaged in social mobilisation joined the march, altering its character by transforming it into a platform to express pro-monarchy sentiments.<sup>51</sup> Despite incremental amendments to the law, leading to its eventual repeal in 2017, the disruptive potential of the mobilisation in terms of critiquing traditional social norms underwent a significant shift.

In other instances, support from the business elite is symbolic in nature and associated with specific business people who hold ideological ties to Islamist political parties. A respondent provided the example of well-known brands linked to Islamist entrepreneurs distributing water to demonstrators during protests against the Israeli attack in Gaza.<sup>52</sup> Tribes are also known for supporting protests that express grievances about infrastructure projects on their ancestral lands or perceived governmental neglect of peripheral areas with regards to municipal services. One example dates back to 2011 when the Zawahra and Khalayla tribes blocked a major road near Amman to demand the return of lands they believed belonged to them.<sup>53</sup> Similar tribal support is thought to have played a role in several protests in Ma’an.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the 2019 teacher protests, which were seen to

46 Interview with Manal Kasht, General Manager, Shabbat to empower women in politics.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Jordan: thousands protest against IMF-backed austerity measures, 2018. The Guardian, 28 June: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/03/jordan-amman-protest-imf-austerity-measures>.

49 Kayyali, A., 2020. ‘Jordan’s stubborn insistence on “business as usual”’, Sada Journal Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 November: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83232>.

50 Tynes, N., 2021. ‘Social media’s role in the fight to stop honour crimes in Jordan’. The New Arab, 15 November: <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/fight-stop-honour-crimes-jordan>.

51 Schwedler, J. 2022. ‘Protesting Jordan geographies of power and dissent’. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 222.

52 Interview with Wael Khatib, PhD Candidate, Ghent University.

53 Schwedler, J. 2022. ‘Protesting Jordan geographies of power and dissent’. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 66.

54 Williams, S. E. 2018. Exclusion, not extremism, fuels tensions in Jordan’s south, Middle East Eye, 11 June: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusion-not-extremism-fuels-tensions-jordans-south>.

benefit from the support of Islamist parties,<sup>55</sup> did not gain elite endorsement and eventually the Teachers' Syndicate was shut down.<sup>56</sup>

In yet other cases, co-optation manifests in bizarre and somewhat threatening ways, as reported by a respondent who mentioned some activists receiving friendly calls from the Secret Service and police encouraging them to participate in upcoming protests so that they could use the spectre of popular unrest to avert change and strengthen vested interests.<sup>57</sup> More commonly, co-optation offers demonstration leaders socially prestigious positions in utterly toothless committees or affiliations with political institutes, often with a competitive salary.<sup>58</sup> This method of co-optation has, over time, created a hybrid civil society in Jordan in which individuals often combine institutional roles with street or social activism. This creates an environment in which radical demands are toned down while ambitious activists exploit protests to boost their careers. At times, the net of co-optation is cast more widely beyond protest leaders, but this is not the norm. For instance, one respondent said that the monarchy had engaged the business elite to address unemployment protests in 2019 by offering job opportunities to a significant number of participating demonstrators.<sup>59</sup> This exceptional move allowed the monarchy to prevent this demonstration from taking a more radical turn.

## Appease or resist the elite? A social movement's dilemma

As the preceding section has illustrated, bringing about policy change, let alone systemic change, without the endorsement of Jordan's politically relevant elites faces many challenges. Elite involvement and boundaries have important self-censoring and competitive effects on the formation of social movements. In some cases, social movements have adapted their demands and protest strategies to appeal to particular segments of the politically relevant elite, altering their own identity in the process. For instance, the 2018 protests against the agreement between Jordan and the IMF were spearheaded by 33 left-leaning trade unions through a strike and road blockage.<sup>60</sup> Their motivation extended beyond mere opposition to the proposed increase in the personal tax rate since there was also an ideological component of resistance to neo-liberal policies. Demonstrators demanded that the government revoke the proposed increase in fuel taxes and personal taxation, or resign. However, the movement's support base gradually expanded to include more middle-to-upper-class demonstrators. This expansion was fueled by concerns over the agreement's provisions for increasing taxation for wealthy Jordanians and, notably, companies, which raised alarm among members of the business elite. The Chamber of Industry, for example, voiced its apprehensiveness about the law, effectively aligning with the demonstrators.<sup>61</sup> Typically, this social class favors incremental changes, since they stand to lose significantly from radical upheaval. This dynamic led to a less confrontational policy outcome, with a portion of the movement ending the protests following the resignation of the prime minister.

---

55 Interview with a PhD Candidate, expert on Jordan.

56 Jordan: Teachers' Syndicate Closed; Leaders Arrested, Urban Rights Watch, 2020. 30 July: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/30/jordan-teachers-syndicate-closed-leaders-arrested>.

57 Interview with Benjamin Schuetze, Senior Researcher and Emmy Noether Junior Research Group leader, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI).

58 *Ibid.*

59 Interview with Sara Ababneh, Lecturer, The University of Sheffield.

---

60 Abou Jbara, J. 2018. 'Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making', Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

61 Alajlani, L., 2020. "Loyalty vs. Voice": What explains the divergent attitudes of the business elite toward democratization? The Case of Jordan', Central European University.

However, the new cabinet under Omar Razzaz, a former World Bank official well-respected in the business community, demonstrated a high degree of ideological continuity, with 14 of 28 ministers retaining their posts.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, the IMF-inspired measures were reconfigured rather than abolished. Ultimately, the tax increases for companies were much diluted, reflecting the influence of the business elite. On the contrary, there has been an increase in income imposition only for a small percentage of Jordanians earning more than 20000 Jordanian dinar a year (26,000 euro).

Civil society organisations also compete with each other, vying for leadership on a particular issue and seeking media coverage, financial support, credibility for their participants and legitimacy for their cause – all of which can be obtained from the politically relevant elite.<sup>63</sup> In brief, it is key for social movements to demonstrate their worthiness to elite members or subgroups, at times even more so than to fellow citizens. For instance, opting for peaceful, organised protests, as opposed to engaging in violent or controversial actions, helps gain acceptability in the eyes of powerful individuals. It is also more convenient to demand limited reforms rather than advocating for deep policy changes or even systemic change.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, some social movements and protests have become a negotiation strategy rather than a call for change. This evolution has given rise to numerous small-scale demonstrations across the country that address specific local issues such as water access, infrastructure and unemployment. The aim is to obtain targeted, often uncontroversial concessions from the political authorities.

62 Schiffer, R., 2018. 'Protest as the last straw : A report on Jordan's tax reform in 2018', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.  
 63 Interview with Mohammed T.Bani Salameh, Professor of Political Science at Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.  
 64 Interview with Rasha Fiyani Executive Director, Politics and Society Institute and think tank expert, Jordan.

## Supporting change in Jordan: A way forward

The preceding analysis underscores the difficulties of bringing about bottom-up reform in Jordan. It also highlights the government's effective management of dissent through various tactics, especially its provision of limited permission to protest and its systemic co-optation of protest leaders. It is also apparent, however, that there is a wide gap between the politically relevant elite and the general population regarding what reforms are desired. As members of the elite are appointed rather than elected to positions of power, nepotism has been favoured over competency and many citizens now perceive the political system as closed and corrupted. The Arab Barometer indicates a decline in the proportion of Jordanians who trust the government from 71.5 per cent in 2011 to 31 per cent in 2022.<sup>65</sup> The same data set reveals a decrease in trust in parliament from 48 per cent in 2011 to 16 per cent in 2022.<sup>66</sup>

The current strategy of the politically relevant elite to maintain power and suppress dissent relies heavily on providing jobs, benefits and resources to demonstrators. However, these funds are far from limitless. Jordan currently faces formidable economic challenges, including an alarming 22.9 per cent unemployment rate,<sup>67</sup> a public debt equivalent to 91.5 per cent of GDP,<sup>68</sup> and 24 per cent of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>69</sup> Despite Jordan receiving approximately US\$3.5 billion in foreign

65 Arab Barometer, 2022. Arab Barometer VII Jordan Report, August: [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Jordan\\_Report-EN.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Jordan_Report-EN.pdf).

66 *Ibid.*

67 Al-Khalidi, S. 2023. 'Jordan Must Accelerate Reforms to Drive Faster Growth', IMF says', Reuters, 18 May: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordan-must-accelerate-reforms-drive-faster-growth-imf-2023-05-17/>.

68 Fitch Affirms Jordan at 'BB-', Outlook Stable, Fitch Ratings, 2023. 10 May: <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/fitch-affirms-jordan-at-bb-outlook-stable-10-11-2023>.

69 Weldali, M. Poverty rate of 24.1% requires policy change – experts, June 6.

aid annually (7.2% of the GDP),<sup>70</sup> it is uncertain whether this financial support is sufficient to address looming economic challenges.

A lack of popular trust in government and a problematic economic situation are only two elements of the headwinds facing Jordan. They are likely to increase public dissatisfaction as effective routes to bring about better policies or even a different political system hardly exist. Other problems include a drug smuggling and use of drugs crisis around the border with Syria, tensions with Israel, and yet more economic difficulties. As frustration accumulates beneath the surface, Jordan's authorities run the risk of misjudging their ability to manage discontent. Major political unrest can and would threaten political stability. Hence, there is a compelling need to consider alternative ways to bring popular demands to institutional decision makers.

One idea is for parties and activists to form cross-ideological coalitions that can drive reforms through popular legislative initiatives or referendums. For instance, popular legislative action might advocate for measures against corruption or a change in the electoral law. Within defined limits, like some degree of elite veto power and a voters' quorum, such changes might gain acceptance with the monarchy as a means to resolve common grievances. This cross-ideological approach could also extend to parliamentary proceedings. Given that the current legislative landscape favours

locally-based independent representatives over party-elected ones, there is also an opportunity to form parliamentary coalitions to address shared local concerns at a national level, such as water issues. This form of cooperation would also promote more horizontal solidarity between constituencies. Considering existing limitations, these two strategies offer viable alternatives to protests, providing avenues to advance bottom-up change through cooperative efforts.

With a growing sense of frustration among citizens, a lack of avenues to bring about change from the grassroots up and dwindling financial and political resources, there is risk of violence and extremist elements gaining prominence within the protest movement. Despite this, European policy makers persist in their prolonged 'wait-and-see' approach towards reforms in Jordan. Even the monarchy has acknowledged the risk of inertia at this point, at least verbally, and initiated preliminary steps towards more systemic reforms. For instance, the king has affirmed Jordan's commitment to political and media pluralism<sup>71</sup> and stressed the importance of a robust multi-party system, envisioning the emergence of two or three major parties.<sup>72</sup> He has also established a committee for political modernisation. However, the pace of reform remains sluggish and thus far has failed to yield significant systemic changes. Given Jordan's continued reliance on foreign funds, an opportunity also exists for European policymakers to introduce conditionalities with a clearly defined timeline for implementation.

70 Alajlouni, L. 2023. Jordanians are Protesting Again. It's Time for Economic and Administrative Reform, 4 January: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/jordanians-are-protesting-again-its-time-for-economic-and-administrative-reforms/>.

71 King Abdullah, 2023. 'King says Jordan Committed to Political, Media Pluralism; Directs Government to Review Access to Information Bill', 23 August: <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/news/king-says-jordan-committed-political-media-pluralism-directs-government-review-access>.

72 Linfield, D. 2021. 'Jordan Could Repair Public Rift With These Five Reforms', 16 June: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/16/jordan-could-repair-public-rift-with-these-five-reforms-pub-84774>.

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

[www.clingendael.org/cru](http://www.clingendael.org/cru)  
[cru@clingendael.org](mailto:cru@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 clingendael\_institute  
 Clingendael Institute  
 Newsletter

### About the author

**Matteo Colombo** works as a Research Fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. He is part of its Middle East team focusing on political Islam, the rule of law, and the political economy of Egypt and Libya.