

# Democratic Reform in Jordan? Expectations After the King's Recent Call to Review Political Life

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Calls for political reform in Jordan have come at a time when there is no popular political pressure or protest movement in the streets, as was the case during the Arab Spring, and - unexpectedly - after the parliamentary elections. As a result, political elites have developed various theories to explain the timing of these calls and the hidden motives behind them. Of course, this also raises the usual questions about whether there was in fact a genuine and serious intent to move further towards a democratic transition, which seems to have stalled and perhaps even been reversed, with regard to Jordan's ranking for democratic institutions and international human rights.



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# 1

## Introduction

In an interview with the Jordan News Agency on 30 January 2021, King Abdullah II spoke about reviewing Jordanian laws governing political life, particularly the controversial Elections Law, Local Administration Law, and Political Parties Law.<sup>1</sup>

The irony is that the king's unexpected statements were made only about two months after Jordan's most recent parliamentary elections, which saw a marked decline in popular engagement and political participation, particularly in the capital, Amman, and other major cities. There was also a drop in Palestinian-Jordanian representation in the political process. This was particularly evident in the composition of the Jordanian Senate, which is appointed by royal decree. Moreover, there were complaints about the substantial role of political financing in the elections, and the general failure of political parties to get their candidates into parliament. Furthermore, there was a significant decline

in the number of seats won by the Islamist opposition, which makes up the largest political party in Jordan. They were unable to form a parliamentary bloc because a bloc requires thirteen representatives, while the Islamists and their allies took only eight seats.

What drew attention to the king's comments was that the Minister of Political and Parliamentary Affairs, Musa Al-Maaitah, immediately confirmed this stance in various political exchanges. He indicated that the government intended to open spaces for dialogue among different groups in order to review laws governing political activity, as the king had mentioned in his speech.

Later, the king signaled again that he planned to change course politically, when he sent an unusual letter to the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, Ahmad Husni. In the letter, the king called on him to develop the directorate and its operations, and relieve it of its previous burdens outside the scope of professional security, particularly in the field of investment. This casts a shadow on the celebrations and retrospectives taking place

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<sup>1</sup> The king was quoted by the Jordan News Agency as saying: "We must examine the laws governing political life, such as the Elections, Political Parties, and Local Administration Laws," Jordan News Agency, 31 January 2021, at the following link: <https://cutt.us/jmOVX>

on the eve of the kingdom's centennial, as well as on the calls for political and administrative reform that had begun to circulate in political and media circles.<sup>2</sup>

Leading media and political figures have embraced these new calls to reexamine the path towards reform. However, much of Jordanian society seems apprehensive about the matter, and harbors major doubts about how serious these comments really are. There have been many proposals for political reform over the last two decades, drawn up by committees formed by royal decree and backed by the king's assurances that this would speed up the process of democratic transition. These committees included the "Jordan First" Committee, the National Agenda Committee, and the National Dialogue Committee, which were formed during the Arab Spring. However, these did nothing to change the political status quo; indeed, Jordan recently dropped lower on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which previously classified Jordan as a hybrid regime and now considers it to be authoritarian.

It is also ironic that calls for political reform are happening while there is no popular political pressure at all, or protest movement in the streets, as we saw during the Arab Spring, and—unexpectedly— after the parliamentary elections. As a result, political elites have come up with all kinds of theories to explain the timing of these calls, and the hidden motives behind them. Of course, this also raises all the usual questions about whether there was really a genuine and serious intent to move further towards a democratic transition, which seems to have stalled and perhaps even been reversed, with regard to Jordan's ranking for democratic institutions and international human rights.

This policy paper aims to discuss the reasons, motives, assumptions and opinion of members of the political elite, regarding the renewed conversation around political reform today, and the potential outcomes and practical expectations for this.

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<sup>2</sup> See the letter in full in the following news article: "The king's letter to the head of the General Intelligence Directorate: Focus all energies within appropriate jurisdiction," Ammon News, 17 February 2021, at the following link: <https://cutt.us/cPa7Z>

## 2

# Historical Review: A Faltering Democracy

Parliamentary life in Jordan had an early beginning. It began with the passage of the Basic Law of the Transjordan Emirate in 1929 and continued after the kingdom declared its independence (and issued the constitution of 1947), and after the Unification of the Two Banks in 1950, and constitution of 1952. Parliamentary activity came to a halt in 1974, after the 1974 Arab League summit in Rabat declared the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to be the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” which resulted in the suspension of parliamentary elections and the parliament itself. The parliament was replaced by the National Consultative Councils from 1978 until 1984, when the ninth parliament was reconvened in an extended session (after previously being elected and then prorogued).<sup>3</sup>

The 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of strong and effective parliaments, and for the first time, a parliamentary government with a majority coalition in the House of

Representatives, led by prime minister Suleiman Nabulsi (1956-57). This arrangement was short-lived, due to the Free Officers’ coup attempt, after which various ministers, politicians, and military figures were imprisoned. Shortly after, Samir Al-Rifai’s government collapsed in 1963, after a parliamentary vote of no confidence.<sup>4</sup>

Parliamentary elections resumed again in 1989, after protests in the south spread throughout the kingdom. The eleventh parliament was therefore held at an historical juncture in which the Islamist opposition took a significant portion of seats in the House of Representatives, and various political opposition forces and figures rose to power.

Most importantly, political life made tangible progress after this, through reexamining all laws that restricted political activity and political parties. This gave rise to the Jordanian National Charter of 1992, in coordination with leaders of diverse political forces in the country. There

<sup>3</sup> “The Suspension of Parliament and Establishment of National Consultative Councils (1974-1984),” Parliament of Jordan website, at the following link: <https://cutt.us/VSwHa>

<sup>4</sup> See: Hany al-Hourani, *The History of Parliamentary Life in Jordan (1929-1957)*, Sharq Press, Nicosia (Cyprus), 1989, p. 77-99; and “Details on the Session that Brought Down the Government of Samir al-Rifai in 1963,” Zamancom- Qisat al-Ams, at the following link: <https://www.zamancom.com/?p=4236>.

were laws established pertaining to political parties, meetings, and public freedoms, and it seemed that the official institutional position was to turn towards a new democratic path, and transition towards a new political stage.

However, the democratic process was stalled again by international and regional events (including the second Gulf War in 1990, and ensuing international and regional animosity towards Jordan in the aftermath of the war), as well as domestic challenges (such as the economic crisis, privatization program, and transition towards a free market economy, with its corresponding financial and economic procedures that were not aligned with public needs). These challenges became apparent in the 1993 elections, which were carried out according to the new elections system, known as the “one-man one-vote” law in political circles. It is widely believed that the law was designed to weaken Islamist opposition in light of the Jordanian-Israeli peace negotiations which began with the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 and continued through the signing of the peace treaty in 1994, which was then ratified by the twelfth parliament.<sup>5</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood boycotted the elections of 1997, as did its party, the Islamic Action Front, which was founded after the resurgence of political parties and political

activity in 1992. It participated again in parliamentary elections in 2003, after the elections had been postponed for two years. However, in the parliamentary and municipal elections of 2007, there was blatant interference aimed to weaken Islamists and the opposition in general. This led to early elections in 2010, which the Islamists also boycotted. The election was held under the new election system, known as the “virtual districts” system. It is thought that this was also designed to weaken political opposition.<sup>6</sup>

The parliament quickly lost its public support, after a questionable decision to give the government a vote of confidence, as popular protests began in Jordan, and in the Arab world in general. By the beginning of the following year, the Arab youth uprisings broke out. It was a moment of unprecedented transformation in the Arab world that overthrew rulers known for their iron grip (in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen). This also led to changes in the Jordanian government, and the launch of national dialogue initiatives to produce political reform. A National Dialogue Committee was set up, as well as a Royal Committee to examine constitutional amendments. The constitution was reviewed to an unprecedented extent, and there were many amendments made to its articles. This was seen as a means to strengthen the

<sup>5</sup> For more details about the return to parliamentary life and what came after, see Dr. Ali Muhafaza, *Restricting Democracy: Jordan from 1989-1999*, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, first edition, 2001, p. 131-307.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, *The Islamic Solution in Jordan: Islamists and Ventures of Democracy and Security*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Amman) and Center for Strategic Studies (University of Jordan), Amman, 2013, p. 78-92, 142-146.

parliament and to reestablish the balance of power in government. The Elections Law was also amended to keep the “one-man one-vote” system, and to implement national lists. In 2012, elections were held again, although they were boycotted again by the Islamists.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016, elections took place in accordance with the new electoral system, which for the

first time was based on proportional open lists at the governorate level; this system was also used in the 2020 elections. Both of these elections saw the renewed involvement of Islamists and opposition parties in general.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Musa Shteivi, et al., *Constitutional Reform in Jordan*, Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, 2016, p. 61-96.

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<sup>8</sup> See Saleh Abdel Fatah al-Khawaldeh, *The Electoral System in Jordan in 2016: An Analytical Study*, at the following link: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328065233\\_alnzam\\_alantkhaby\\_fy\\_alardn\\_lam\\_2016m\\_Drast\\_thlylyt](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328065233_alnzam_alantkhaby_fy_alardn_lam_2016m_Drast_thlylyt)

### 3

## Determinants and Restrictions on Democratic Transition

It has been repeatedly observed during evaluations of the political process throughout the past century that key political breakthroughs usually occurred after popular protest movements— whether in 1929, 1956, or 1989. However, external factors also played a major role— whether the British mandate, the Palestinian question and its entanglements within Jordanian domestic politics, or other international and regional developments. This brings us to the main factors that will determine how the democratic process and political reform proceed in Jordan.

**A) Jordan's Geostrategic Position:** Jordan's geographic position creates significant challenges with regard to both the regional and international context. Jordan is located between key Arab countries (Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt). These are neighboring countries whose borders have sometimes overlapped, as occurred with the Unification of the Two Banks in 1950 because of the Palestinian question, which has heightened security concerns in domestic politics and increased the influence of foreign relations on domestic affairs. Perhaps one of the ironies is

that one of the principles of foreign policy is that it is shaped by domestic policy, that is, it is the product of the perspectives of the government, opposition, and other various forces. In the Jordanian case, it seems to be the other way around—domestic policy was shaped by foreign affairs, and reflected regional developments happening around it.

In the 1950s, Nasserist discourse came to constitute a challenge to the legitimacy of the Jordanian regime. Coups in neighboring countries brought military figures, socialists, and Ba'athist nationalists to power, while the infamous al-Rehab palace massacre of 1958 ended Hashemite rule in Iraq. In the 1960s, the PLO emerged, and then the events of September 1970 took place (i.e. the conflict between the Jordanian state and Palestinian organizations). During the reign of the late King Hussein bin Talal, the question of Palestinian representation was an important and pressing question shaping the contours of Jordanian politics, both foreign and domestic, up until the decision to sever connections between the West Bank and Jordan in 1988. Jordan also welcomed the largest numbers of

Palestinian refugees after the 1948 Nakba and 1967 defeat.<sup>9</sup>

International and regional factors also shaped the calculations of Jordanian leaders, who were preoccupied with political stability as they grappled with what Jordanian historians have described as “historic emergencies” for the kingdom. Concerns about political stability usually took precedence over political reform, although the Jordanian regime was considered, in comparison to other Arab regimes, to be more open and tolerant with its opponents and freedom of expression. The prevailing belief was, and remains to this day, that stability should come before democracy due to the regional context and circumstances.

There were certain historical moments celebrated in the discourse of opposition elites, which preoccupied political leaders who did not want to see such events happen again. This occurred with the parliamentary government of 1956, which was accused of collaborating with regional Nasserist and Baathist forces, and the fall of Samir al-Rifai’s government (a similar parliament never emerged again). Furthermore, the events of 1970 caused internal strife, which developed into deeper questions about the relationship between national identity and citizenship.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Hazem Nuseibeh, *A Contemporary Political History of Jordan from 1952-1967*, Amman, second edition, 1992, p. 49-59; and Suleiman Mousa, *A Contemporary History of Jordan (June 1967-1995)*, Ministry of Culture, Amman, 2011, p. 9-15, 69-105, and 129-162.

**B) The Demographic Factor:** This brings us to another determinant for the democratic transition, namely the demographic factor, which is essentially a euphemism for the relationship between East Bank Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians. This issue is the result of extensive interconnections between the two groups, especially after the Unification of the Two Banks in 1950. This was followed by the severance of ties between the two banks in 1988, which annulled Palestinian-Jordanian citizenship, including for those who had yellow Palestinian identity cards. In between these two states of affairs, the events of September 1970 took place, which created serious divisions in this relationship (Jordanians would throw their weight into the public sector, while Palestinian-Jordanians dominated in the private sector).

The demographic factor pervaded many political and economic arrangements. For “East Bank Jordanians,” this issue was about protecting the national identity of the state and fears of an alternate state. This was also related to political elites’ belief that international actors saw Jordan as a state that could absorb Palestinian refugees in place of their original homeland. These concerns were reflected in the Election Law and geographic and demographic controversies, as well as in economic issues, privatization, and the imposition of taxes. This also influenced the development of the principles of citizenship, political rights, and political representation for Jordanians of Palestinian descent. Any

changes or developments in the democratic path or political reform process must seriously take into account this situation, especially given the growing calls from political elites on both sides. One side calls for the rights to citizenship that it has been deprived, while the other warns that Jordanian identity is being threatened.

**C) Islamists:** Although the Muslim Brotherhood and their party, the Islamist Action Front, constitute a legal opposition party in Jordan, there are particular issues that distinguish Islamists from other political forces, and which have complicated their relationship with other state institutions. It is well-known that Islamists are particularly effective in mobilizing popular forces; they have an exceptional capacity to address the public and harness popular sentiments. Their position is more sensitive because of its connection to religion, and also because of concerns that have been raised both by the regime and other political forces regarding Islamists' ultimate intentions. Although they have stated their commitment to the democratic process, there are still suspicions and concerns among diverse political groups who feel that they have other hidden agendas.

It should be mentioned that although there had for decades been good relations between King Hussein and the Islamists, the internal composition of the Brotherhood from the

1990s until today has become dominated by Jordanians of Palestinian descent, which adds to the sensitivity and mutual concerns around the issue. There are many internal political factors that have contributed to this, such as official policies encouraging the Jordanian elites to leave the Brotherhood and found other entities, which do not have the same presence on the ground as the parent organization they arose from.

In addition to all this, the relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood has played a key role in determining domestic policy and creating a framework for the democratic process. This is because political leaders felt that the Brotherhood had foreign connections and was working across borders through the Brotherhood's international organization. The Brotherhood then moved towards developing their domestic organization and formally ended their connections with the organization's international arm. The regime continued to see the Brotherhood's regional political interests as violating the state's policies. In 2006, it was claimed they were part of a regional alliance, the so-called "Axis of Resistance" consisting of Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamists. After the Arab Spring in 2011, they were seen as part of the Turkish-Qatari-Islamist coalition. There was also alleged cooperation between Hamas (an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine) and the Brotherhood in Jordan. In

2009-2010, an organizational restructuring took place in which Hamas officially split from the Brotherhood in Jordan.<sup>10</sup>

#### **D) The Government and Opposition's**

**Conflicting Interests:** As is the case with any country in the world, one of the factors shaping the democratic process has to do with the conflict between the forces that are in power and which benefit from the current situation, and the opposition forces which try to enact change. The conservative and state-affiliated forces do not want changes that would alter the balance of power and detract from centralized authority, while the opposition tries to distribute power and expand participation and partnerships in decision-making. Despite periodic elections, there has not been a broader distribution of authority, expansion of the decision-making base, or a better balance between the different centers of authority, as is generally the case with democratic system.

Dr. Jafar Hassan, head of the Politics and Society Institute, affirmed the importance of this determinant in an interview on 20 February 2021. He also discussed the regional influences which have placed security before reform during different periods of history. The king himself has stated (in his book *Our Last Best Chance*) that the process of political reform often took a step backward for every two steps forward because some were opposed to change out of fear that they would lose certain privileges. Meanwhile, others were opposed because they lacked the proper vision, and simply preferred to keep things as they were.

Hassan added that the king has said that on a number of occasions, he encountered officials who lacked the courage to undertake difficult changes, or who were only concerned with their own interests, instead of the affairs of the people whom they were appointed to take care of and serve.

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<sup>10</sup> Mohammad Abu Rumman, *The State and the Brotherhood: Playing with Red Lines in Jordan*, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 10 February 2014, at the following link: <https://cutt.us/TCCny>

## 4

### Discussing Political Reform Today

In light of what has been discussed above, whether regarding history or the factors shaping a democratic transition, what are the prospects for a new conversation today about political reform, and could it achieve different results than earlier attempts?

Jordanian political elites have multiple opinions on this matter, most of which are tied to the “timing” of the new initiative. In the regard, Dr. Zaid Eyadat, director of the Center of Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, said in an interview on 16 February 2021 that there were two perspectives among different political circles regarding the new initiative.

The first group felt that there was no way to get out of the usual game of buying time, in an effort to signal Jordan’s intentions to the new US administration. This is regarding making the Middle East a priority, and that it will not sacrifice its interests for the sake of democracy. The new US administration is different in that it is more interested in this matter, and will be eager to improve political life, especially with allies like Jordan.

According to Eyadat, the second perspective is that the new initiative did not come out of a vacuum but rather was founded on a deeper reading of the geostrategic shifts in the region, which are also connected to the Jordanian situation. After what happened with the Palestinian question, normalization, and its effects on Jordan, perhaps what distinguishes Jordan in the Arab region today and gives it particular importance for the West and the US administration, is that it offers an example of an outstanding reforming democracy. This is especially important given that the new US administration has made key observations about how politics in the Arab world today are descending into authoritarianism. It will therefore find Jordan to be an excellent ally with a particular role to play, in contrast with its neighbors.

These two theories also have followers among political elites on the ground. Marwan al-Faouri, who founded the Islamic Center Party in Jordan and the Global Forum for Moderation, said in an interview on 18 February 2021 that he saw connections between the recent Jordanian protest movement and the new US administration. He described this as a domestic

political shift in anticipation of any potential US pressure or linking of aid to issues related to human rights and public freedoms.

Al-Faouri said that the many different signals coming out of centers of power in Amman demonstrate the necessity of political change and the need to mend the fractured relationship between the state and society. This became particularly clear in the letter from the king to the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, which indicated the king's intent to reformulate the role of the directorate to become limited to the professional security sphere. Al-Faouri stated that this could later lead to moving domestic affairs to a different or perhaps new agency, as has happened in other countries, such as the US, which leaves domestic affairs to the FBI.

In an interview conducted on 18 February 2021, Sakher Dudin, a Jordanian senator, shared Faouri's vision regarding the role of international changes, especially the new US administration, in explaining the resurgence of the question of political reform. He also connected this with the difficult economic situation and its domestic political consequences especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has forced leaders to make political change happen in order to deal with the general situation in country, and to alleviate domestic political discontent. This attempt to preempt potential unrest mirrors what King Hussein did in 1989, when he anticipated global changes, reviewed domestic affairs, launched a return to

parliamentary life, and made tangible changes towards the democratic process.

Dr. Mohamed al-Momani, a current Jordanian senator, former Minister of Media Affairs and Communications, and a professor of political science, played down the issue of US pressure in his interview on 17 February 2021. He pointed out that the US administration will not be focused during the coming period on the region as a whole, nor on the issue of democracy. The most important thing is that US allies remain interested in supporting domestic political stability. Thus, any call for domestic reform is intended to be balanced with the issue of stability, and not to stir up the country or weaken the state or regime. Additionally, the current US position is that political reform must necessarily come from within, and not from the outside, and that it should be connected to the specific circumstances of each country.

Dr. Jafar Hassan agreed with al-Momani's position and added that this was an opportune moment, more than ever before, due to the lack of regional and international pressures. This could perhaps help in a peaceful transition to the political reform process, and in translating the king's vision to turn its components and objectives into a reality, especially regarding developing public administration and creating a state grounded in laws and institutions, as we currently see in the state's centennial political discourse.

Al-Momni attributes the real reason for this change to the king's belief in the need for political reform following the centennial of the Jordanian state. This is why he has presented an approach emphasizing the need to reevaluate political laws without getting involved in the details. He thus leaving the door open for state institutions, political forces, and civil society organizations to develop a consensus-based national approach to make the necessary leap forward.

Regardless of experts' different explanations and justifications, all concluded by saying that the changing international and regional context is behind the new call for reform and is spurring Jordan to regain control over the reform initiative, whether through relationships with the new US administration or through becoming an example in the region. Internal domestic dynamics are of no less importance here, especially with regard to the conditions created by the economic and financial crisis, the record levels of unemployment, the widening gap between the government and the people, and escalating unrest among political forces. All of this led to the preemptory steps that have been taken, as leaders signal their intent to prepare for new societal circumstances in Jordan.

We should mention another important variable here, namely, the new generation of youth who are suffering from challenging financial and economic circumstances. They feel politically alienated and will mobilize to make their demands heard. If they do not find a

place for themselves in the spaces provided by the state, then they will turn to popular politics and protests as an alternate route through which they can make their voices heard.

**However, a key question remains: Why did the initiative not launch these calls for reform before the recent parliamentary elections, and wait until after the elections took place?**

Politicians suggested that the current political situation is connected to the previous political stage, namely, the Trump administration's policies, which encouraged conservative currents, as well as the remnants of the Arab Spring and the deep rift in trust that it created between the regime and political forces, especially Islamists. This had an effect on the composition of the government and the two chambers of parliament (the Senate and House of Representatives), and the general trend towards state policies that pushed Jordan towards its classification as an authoritarian state, and its drop on the global list of democratic countries.

The new international circumstances and corresponding feedback that parliamentary elections and the political status quo had not adequately addressed current unrest or the domestic and foreign challenges on the horizon, strengthened the conviction in centers of power that political changes need to occur. They have taken advantage of the opportunity to discuss the state's centennial, to conduct internal reviews, and to focus on taking serious steps forward.

## 5

# Prospects for Political Transformation

If we move beyond timing and the intentions at play to the work being done, we might ask the following key question: What are the limitations and possibilities for the political reform that is being discussed? Will this really lead to a tangible leap forward in the process of democratic transition?

The answer to this question lies within all that has been previously discussed, with regard to the parameters for democratic transition, the historical past (in the state's subconscious), as well as the Royal Discussion Papers. These important documents were issued by the king in the form of seven main papers, during a five-year period from 2012 to 2017. Of these papers, five dealt directly with the king's vision for what he wanted to achieve in the Jordanian political system and democracy, and the conditions and dynamics necessary to achieve this. He clearly discusses the need to create a parliamentary monarchy, parliamentary governments, to distribute power, and to develop parliamentary activity and political parties in the country. He also mentions the role of the monarchy in ensuring the implementation of the constitution and

that the king as the head of executive authority has the responsibility to defend the country's interests and its national security through his government.

These discussion papers demonstrate an advanced and deep reading of the Jordanian situation, but until now there has been no roadmap for implementing them gradually and through building consensus, as the king called for. This will involve overcoming major obstacles, especially the fragmentation of political parties and the inability to build an equivalent space for Islamists in politics. This has created a choice between the state and Islamism without any competition within the political system, as is necessary for the kind of political diversity we see in other states, as Dr. Mohamed al-Momni observed.

Al-Momani and Sakher Dudin have now thrown the ball in the court of the political forces to send clear messages that will help turn the king's intentions into a political reality through building consensus about national interests and developing a consensus-based political project to form a roadmap that would

gradually help the domestic political situation progress forward.

Although the monarchy is leaning towards political reform following the state's centennial, and there are political forces and elites who support this, there are also still major barriers that stand in the way. Additionally, political parties are weak, and there are influential conservative forces that have concerns that political reform would lead to demographic changes or harm domestic political stability. As a result, the outlook for the reform process depends to a great extent on the capacity to rebuild trust and consensus, not only about laws and politics, but also about a gradual, consensus-based national roadmap that could dispel fears and unite different agendas.

There is still much groundwork that needs to be done for this transition, especially since earlier stages experienced challenging international, regional and local developments. This had domestic repercussions and has resulted in heightened concerns around this issue and created general unrest, particularly regarding political corruption allegations. This has in turn led to the domestic opposition protest movements going out to the streets, along with discontented youth protestors. In addition, there are issues related to political parties, current political forces, and consecutive domestic crises, including the recent teachers' protests, which ended in a ruling to dissolve the teachers' syndicate. This is still an ongoing crisis with many potential outcomes.

## 6

## Conclusion

Many within state circles and among political elites feel that there is now a serious call from the king to open discussion about political reform, which is connected to major changes in both foreign and domestic contexts. However, the prospects of this call are tied to other factors, including holding a smart national dialogue, and reaching consensus between different popular forces— not only the usual political forces but also youth and civil society—and rebuilding trust between the different parties involved. Concerns must also be assuaged and mutual assurances delivered in order to reach a plan that benefits everyone. It seems that the factor of time will be important in light of the domestic economic crisis, the rise in unemployment, and frustration among wide sectors of society.

The king's letter to the head of the General Intelligence Directorate demonstrates that there are new arrangements being made, especially since there were meetings and dialogues in government and elite circles after the letter to evaluate how to make it happen on the ground. In his message, the king focused on the need for the intelligence directorate to

withdraw from the fields of investment and anti-corruption, and to allow the appropriate institutions to carry out that work. Politics is not entirely absent from this letter either, or from the analyses of the message that came from those close to decision-makers. This issue is also complicated because the directorate has permeated throughout domestic politics—not only today, but over its long history. This means that rethinking the scope of intelligence in this field will require more time, and gradual steps and procedures, as well as more carefully distinguishing between the scope of politics and security, which have largely overlapped and become mixed together during the past decades.

**How can we prevent a repeat of what happened before, when plans for political reform did not become a reality?**

**The answer to this question includes multiple points:**

- A first step to address the downgrading in the Economist's democracy ranking could be to stop ruling the country by defense law

- Affirm the king's intentions through other political messages to state institutions to strengthen calls for deeper political reform.
  - Messages from the political opposition that give the impression that their demands are reasonable and realistic, and that they understand the need to compromise on the components and requirements in order for Jordan to become a model for consensus-building.
  - Agreeing on how to run the upcoming transitional stage and to gradually implement political reforms to overcome the concerns of different groups and the current crisis of trust between political opposition forces, on the one hand and the state institutions on the other.
- This will lead to filling the gap that may be produced by the withdrawal of the intelligence directorate from the many responsibilities it has held, some of which it has held for decades.
- Presenting an executive action plan and benchmarks for each of the planned stages, such as making progress with the election law, developing real incentives to strengthen political parties, political parties developing their internal democracy and discourses, integrating youth and women into political work in general, and gradually freeing up investment, collective organizing, anti-corruption, and civil society organizations from security oversight.

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2. Al-Khawaldeh, Saleh Abdel Fatah. The Electoral System in Jordan in 2016: An Analytical Study. Published on ResearchGate (author's page).

### Reports and News Articles

1. "Details on the Session that Brought Down the Government of Samir al-Rifai in 1963." Zamancom- Qisat al-Ams, at the following link: <https://www.zamancom.com/?p=4236>.
2. "King: 'We must examine the laws governing political life, such as the Elections, Political Parties, and Local Administration Laws.'" Jordan News Agency, 30 January 2021.
3. "The Suspension of Parliament and Establishment of National Consultative Councils (1974-1984)." Parliament of Jordan website, at the following link: <https://cutt.us/VSwHa>

### Personal interviews

1. Jafar Hassan, head of the Politics and Society Institute, 20 February 2021.
2. Marwan al-Faouri, founder of Global Forum for Moderation and the Islamic Center Party in Jordan, 17 February 2021.
3. Dr. Mohamed al-Momni, member of the Jordanian Senate, and former Minister of Media Affairs and Communications, 18 February 2021.
4. Sakher Dudin, member of the Jordanian Senate, 18 February 2021.
5. Zaid Eyadat, director of the Center of Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, 16 February 2021.

**About the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Jordan & Iraq**

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**About the author**

Muhammad Abu Rumman is a researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. From 2018 to 2019 he served as Minister of Culture and Minister of Youth in the government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. He has authored a variety of publications on contemporary matters of religion, politics and society. Most of them are available in English and Arabic and can be downloaded from [www.fes-jordan.org/publications](http://www.fes-jordan.org/publications).



International and regional factors have shaped the calculations of Jordanian leaders, who have been preoccupied with political stability as they grappled with what Jordanian historians have described as “historic emergencies” for the kingdom. Concerns about political stability have taken precedence over political reform.



Any changes or developments in the democratic path or political reform process must seriously take the Palestinian-Jordanian demographic question into account, especially given the growing calls from political elites on both sides. One side calls for the rights to citizenship that it has been deprived of, while the other warns that Jordanian identity is being threatened!



The Royal Discussion Papers demonstrate an advanced and deep reading of the Jordanian situation, but until now there has been no roadmap for implementing them gradually and through building consensus, as the king called for. This will require overcoming major obstacles, especially the fragmentation of political parties and the inability to build an equivalent space for Islamists in politics.

For more information on this subject:

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