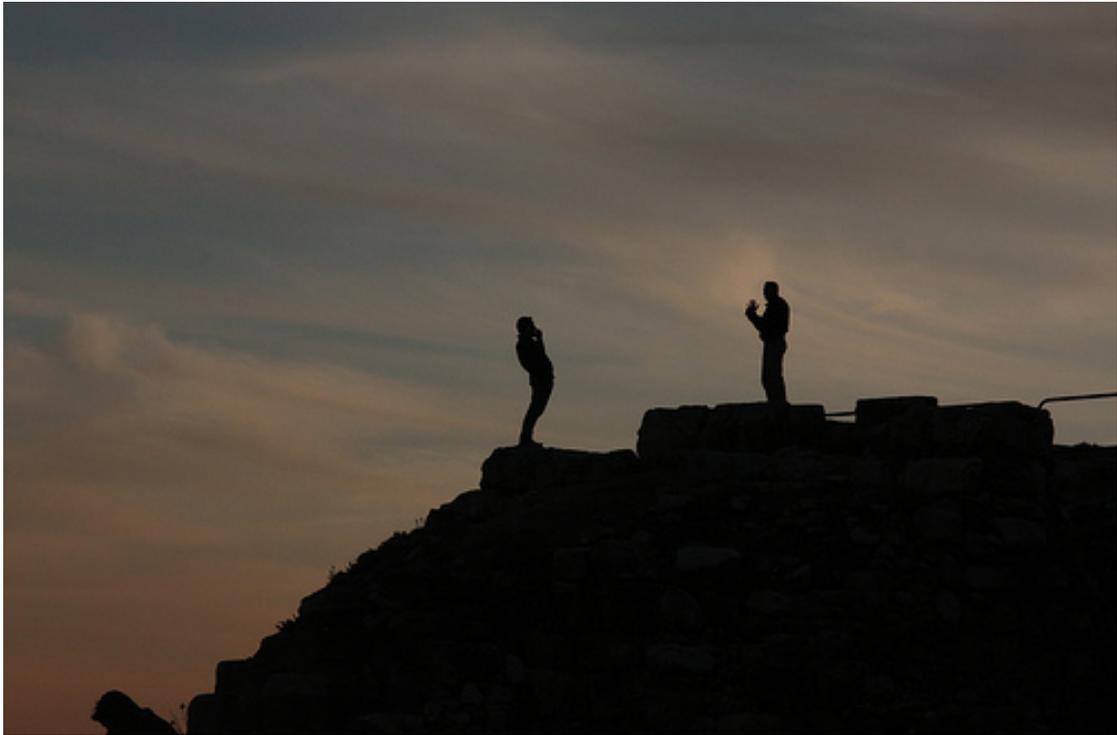


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WORKING PAPER 7

CURTIS R. RYAN



## CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN JORDAN



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# Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan



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## Introduction

November 2009 will mark the 20th anniversary of the 1989 elections that signaled the start of political liberalization in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Jordan's process of political liberalization began defensively in 1989 as a then-precarious regime responded to rioting and political upheavals in many parts of the country (Brand 1992, Brynen 1992, Robinson 1998, Ryan 1998). The waves of political unrest had been triggered by an International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity program in the spring of 1989. The kingdom had reluctantly agreed to the IMF adjustment measures following a prolonged economic crisis that included the rapid devaluation of the Jordanian dinar, a skyrocketing national debt, and rising inflation and unemployment. But the policies intended to address the economic crisis set off a corresponding political crisis as rioting spread from the south of Jordan to parts of the capital. The reductions in state subsidies on staple foods and other goods had led to rapid price increases just as many Jordanians were already having trouble making ends meet.

Out of this sequence of negative developments, however, emerged the liberalization process itself. In the first several years of the program, liberalization included easing government controls over the media, restoring parliamentary life and electoral democracy for the lower house of the legislature, and lifting martial law for the first time in more than twenty years. By 1993 -- following the 1991 creation of a new National Charter dedicated to pluralism, liberalization, and loyalty to the Hashemite monarchy -- the regime allowed for the legalization of political parties for the first time since the 1950's. The very nature of this process involved extensive intra-elite bargaining, and hence also underscores a key feature of political opposition in Jordan; that is, that it has tended to be peaceful and reformist, rather than violent and revolutionary (Mufti 1999). Indeed, the National Charter was meant to institutionalize this long-standing idea of loyal opposition within the Hashemite Kingdom.

Since that time, Jordan has experienced both liberalization and deliberalization, to the chagrin of would-be reformers and democrats. The process was originally heralded as democratization, but in practice soon shifted to a state-controlled attempt at carefully choreographed and limited liberalization. Yet while the reform process is indeed limited, it nonetheless also includes one of the largest democratic and reformist Islamist movements in the region, legalized political parties and professional associations, competitive elections for the national parliament, and the gradual growth of civil society in the kingdom.

This paper provides an analysis of the state of civil society and democratization in Jordan. I will turn first to the nature of the governing system and its institutions, then examine the state of democracy in the kingdom, the nature of the regime and the ruling elite (including key ethnic components), the status of economic liberalization, the role of religion in political life, the nature of political opposition and the question of deliberalization, and finally, the nature of civil society itself in Jordanian society and politics.

## The Nature of the System: Jordan's Government and Political Institutions

Jordan is a Constitutional Monarchy, with the roles and responsibilities of governing institutions established in the 1952 Jordanian Constitution. In Jordanian politics, executive power is vested mainly in the hands of the king, but also in those of his appointed prime minister and cabinet (the Council of Ministers). The political system also includes a bicameral legislature, with a royally appointed 55-member upper house (*Majlis al-'Ayyan* or House of Notables or Senate), and a popularly elected 110-member lower house (*Majlis al-Nu'ab* or House of Representatives). In addition to these national institutions, the kingdom is divided into twelve governorates, each with a royally-appointed governor.

Jordan's judiciary is slowly becoming a more independent entity, as the regime attempts to streamline judicial proceedings, improve the training and salaries of judges, and professionalize the court system. Yet judges remain appointees of the Higher Judiciary Council, whose members are – in turn – themselves royal appointees. The judicial system includes criminal, civil, and religious courts. The religious courts provide for separate proceedings for Muslims and Christians, in order to accommodate different religious traditions and approaches to such matters as marriage, divorce, and family law.

The most important change to the machinery of government in Jordan began when the regime initiated its program of limited political liberalization in 1989. Yet that process is rooted mainly in national legislative and local municipal elections, and hence has not really extended to the executive branch of government. The Prime Minister remains a royal appointee, and cabinet ministers are not necessarily drawn from among the elected members of parliament.

In some respects, as in many other political systems, the upper house of parliament is designed to serve as a check on the lower house. Even the leadership of the two bodies underscores this point, for the Speaker of the House of Representatives is elected from and by members of the House, while the Speaker of the Senate is appointed by the king. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Senate Speaker tends to be a conservative royalist drawn from one of the more powerful families in the kingdom. The membership of the senate overall, in fact, is actually constitutionally required to consist of top regime veterans. The constitution, for example, notes that senate membership is only to be extended to

former prime ministers or other ministers, ambassadors, former top military officers, and so on. As a result, the senate often appears to be a who's who – or who was who – of Jordanian politics. In sum, this chamber remains unaffected by the political liberalization process, at least institutionally. The parliamentary effects of political liberalization, therefore, can be seen almost exclusively within the lower house.

The 110 members of the lower house are divided among 45 multi-member constituencies. Of that total number, the regime reserved a number of seats for specific minority constituencies, all of which have traditionally been strong supporters of the Hashimite monarchy. These include six seats for the rural bedouin, nine seats for the Christian community, and three seats for the Circassian and Chechen communities collectively. Jordanian opposition figures, especially those from Jordan's majority Muslim community, have long argued that rules such as these over-represent ethnic and religious minorities. In contrast, many members of these minority communities see the reserved seats as critical to the preservation of their rights. This type of formula, originally intended to ensure religious and ethnic diversity and representation, has now also been applied to the kingdom's gender politics as, in 2003, the regime also added a quota of six seats to guarantee women's representation in the legislature.

## The State of Democracy in Jordan

Jordan's King Abdullah II ascended the throne in February 1999 following the death of his father, King Hussein, who had ruled Jordan for the previous 46 years. Hussein had only sporadically supported very limited periods of political liberalization within the kingdom, but in 1989 he had presided over the most ambitious program to date. The process then, as now, was largely defensive and at all times cautious. Still, compared to many other countries in the region, Jordan's liberalization looked to be the most promising and the most extensive. Since its origins in riots and unrest triggered by International Monetary Fund austerity programs, Jordan's liberalization came to include the lifting of martial law, the legalization of political parties, loosening of restrictions on the media, and five rounds of national parliamentary elections (in 1989, 1993, 1997, 2003, and 2007).

Since 1989, the kingdom has experienced both liberalization and deliberalization, as the state has at times retreated from earlier reforms. This was particularly noticeable in the aftermath of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel in 1994. At that time, King Hussein's regime showed little patience for opposition to the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, and correspondingly Jordan's "political opening" began to close. That door of reform began to open once again following the monarchical succession from King Hussein to King Abdullah II in 1999.

When King Abdullah first ascended the throne, Jordan's domestic and regional climate actually appeared to be remarkably stable, and the King showed no hesitancy in allowing municipal elections to proceed apace in July 1999. It appeared that for the first time in years the kingdom might finally be able to move beyond its difficult geography and its various security concerns, to renew and consolidate liberalization at home. But since that time, regional and domestic security concerns have continually trumped attempts at domestic reform. Since the second Palestinian uprising or intifada began in September 2000 (in the West Bank and Gaza), the Jordanian government has feared that Israel will expel thousands and perhaps even millions of Palestinians to Jordan. With the intifada still raging, the U.S. war in Afghanistan (and the Jordanian regime's support for it) only widened the gap between the government and its opposition. By 2003, U.S. forces had invaded Jordan's eastern neighbor, Iraq, undermining Jordan's regional security still further.

The regime's response to these regional challenges included electoral delays, limitations on public assembly (especially political demonstrations concerning either Palestine or Iraq), and the launching

of a new public campaign dubbed “Jordan First.” This slogan, which soon appeared on billboards throughout the country, certainly conveys the regime’s nationalist approach and its intention to tolerate no exploitation of divisions within Jordanian society – whether between secularists and Islamists, or between Palestinians and Transjordanians. But the slogan has also been read by the opposition as either avoidance of commitment to broader Arab or Islamic concerns, or as a statement brooking no dissent, and hence no democracy, within increasingly security-oriented Jordanian politics.

But while the external security concerns of the regime are very real – with violence raging both to the West and the East – the fact remains that the electoral delays and other forms of deliberization have only undermined public confidence in reform, liberalization, and the regime itself.

## Ethnicity, National Identity, and the Ruling Elite

One of the major features of contemporary Jordanian politics is the ethnic divide between Palestinians and Transjordanians, or between those originally of West or East Bank origin within modern Jordan. This division has sometimes been given far too much importance in writings on Jordan, especially when used as the social explanation for domestic politics, or when reduced to a "Palestinians versus bedouins" type of image. The nomadic bedouin account for nowhere near a tenth of the kingdom's population, but they are an important part of the social construction of national identity for many Jordanians underscoring "traditional" roots. Family, clan, and tribal links and lineages remain real and important for many Jordanians. In addition, there are other ethnic groups within Jordan, such as the Circassian and Chechen communities, who are mainly Muslims whose ancestors fled the Russian Caucasus region many years ago, and who have since played prominent roles in national politics, as strong supporters of the Hashmite regime. In short, Jordanian national identity has been constructed over time largely in an effort to consolidate both the nation itself and Hashimite rule (Fathi 1994, Layne 1994, Massad 2001).

Still, the division between the Transjordanian and Palestinian communities also remains both real and controversial within national politics. While the estimated percentages vary greatly depending on one's source, it is likely that more than half the population of the kingdom today is of Palestinian origin. The Jordanian government, however, maintains that Palestinians are forty percent of the population at most. Although this West Bank/East Bank ethnic divide is sometimes overstated, it remains a significant feature of Jordan's society, its political economy, and of the Jordanian state itself. Much of the Jordanian government, public sector, and military is dominated by East Bank Jordanians, while much of the private sector is dominated by Palestinians. Before 1970, the Hashimites had regarded their monarchy as more solidly a union of the West and East Banks of the Jordan River, and had striven for some level of balance in the political system. Yet this general ethnic division of labor (so to speak), and hence of political power, became more pronounced in the wake of the 1970-71 civil war within the kingdom.

It is difficult to imagine, in fact, a more contentious and touchy issue within Jordanian politics. Even Palestinians who were most closely associated with the Hashimite establishment are not immune from intra-ethnic controversy. In 1999 'Adnan Abu Odeh, one of the most powerful Palestinians in

the kingdom, a consummate insider and former advisor to King Hussein, found himself under attack from many social and political quarters for his views on Palestinian-Jordanian relations within the kingdom. Abu Odeh had published a book on the topic and then delivered a series of lectures in various venues in Jordan (Abu Odeh 1999). His theme in these writings and speeches was the ethnic imbalance of opportunities within Jordanian society and politics. Abu Odeh was thereafter asked to resign from the senate. Similarly, in 2001, Jawad 'Anani, who just two years earlier had served as Chief of the Royal Hashimite Court, published an editorial in an Arabic daily in the United Arab Emirates, arguing that the ethnic divide represented Jordan's main political hurdle to achieve real inclusion or democracy. Shortly afterwards, Anani too was forced out of the senate. Yet this pattern is neither systematic nor consistent. Former prime minister Taher al-Masri – the only Jordanian prime minister of Palestinian origin -- has also been similarly critical of the ethnic divisions and of the limits of the political liberalization process itself and was one of the most prominent politicians in the 1997 electoral boycott. Yet as recently as 2007, Masri was reappointed to an honored position within the Jordanian senate.

It is important to note that none of these prominent Jordanians of Palestinian origin are separatists; all, in fact, are integrationists, and all support the regime; but they remain critical of specific disparities in representation -- especially in government -- for Palestinian-Jordanians as opposed to East Bank Jordanians.<sup>1</sup> The renewed attention to ethnicity within Jordanian national identity is to some extent rooted in the politics of the regional peace process. With the signing of the 1993 Israel-PLO Accords and the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, the question of Palestinian citizenship, rights, and loyalties resurfaced within Jordanian politics. With the collapse of the peace process, and the onset of the second Palestinian uprising against Israel beginning in September 2000, these questions became still more intense.

Many Palestinians clearly feel that they are second class citizens. But this cannot be taken in a strictly material or economic sense. For the communities do not neatly fall into an economic hierarchy that parallels the political hierarchy. Rather, in addition to impoverished Palestinians in refugee camps (which today are usually urban neighborhoods and often slums), the bulk of Jordan's poorest population can be found especially in the rural Transjordanian communities across southern Jordan. Much of the private sector economic elite, in contrast, is Palestinian. Much of the public sector elite,

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed and thorough discussion of the public sphere debates within Jordan over ethnicity, identity, and democracy can be found in Lynch (1999).

and most top government officials, are Transjordanian. Since the abolition of the national military draft in 1992, Transjordanian dominance of the armed forces and the security services has only increased. Many Transjordanians, in turn, point to the enormous wealth of many Palestinian business families, and to their lavish villas in neighborhoods like Abdun. They point out that of all the Arab countries, only Jordan extended citizenship to Palestinians. And they note that many of the kingdom's prominent ministers and politicians are of Palestinian origin. Accordingly, this line of argument tends invariably to arrive at the issue of gratitude, or perhaps more often, ingratitude.

Palestinians, for their part, including even many who have reached the pinnacle of the kingdom's economic and political elite, say that they are still treated on a day to day basis as second class citizens. They argue that in interactions with bureaucrats, police officers, soldiers, and other officials, they are treated differently and negatively. Family names give much away for anyone in Jordanian society – since the family name usually signals the owner's ethnicity and religion. Many Palestinians then argue that no matter how long they have lived in Jordan, they still feel that they are treated as foreigners – that despite their full citizenship status, they nonetheless do not enjoy full political rights. They feel that they are still seen as temporary residents by many Transjordanians. And indeed, right-wing Transjordanian nationalists agree with them – at least in the sense that these nationalists see Palestinians as essentially foreign, and not as “real” Jordanians. For these nationalists, Jordanian identity is rooted in East Bank heritage, and often in real or imagined bedouin traditional values. For them, Palestinians are indeed temporarily in the kingdom, and of highly suspect loyalty. The nightmare scenario for such ultra-nationalist Transjordanians would be a new wave of Palestinian refugees, forced across the Jordan river in the face of an Israeli military offensive.

Thus both successes and failures in the peace process have actually exacerbated some of these domestic tensions. After the 1993 accords, the creation of the Palestinian National Authority and the possibility for a sovereign Palestinian state raised questions in Jordan about which state Palestinians would be loyal too, which state they would live in, and what any of these decisions and scenarios would mean not just for Jordan's survival as a regime and as a state, but also for its very identity as a nation and as a people.

These questions are essential not just for the future of Palestinians in the kingdom, but also for Transjordanians themselves. The official line on the above discussion, however, tilts heavily against any debate at all. Throughout his reign, for example, King Hussein emphasized the need for national

unity. He underscored the idea that all Jordanian citizens were Jordanians, regardless of origins, and warned against emphasis on two nationalities. For Hussein, as for the Hashimite monarchy today, there remained only one Jordanian “family” and one nationality in the kingdom. In terms of legal nationality and citizenship, that is clearly accurate. But it is also clear that many Jordanians are acutely aware of the ethnic divisions, although they differ considerably on what, if anything, should be done about it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On this issue, as on many others, many Jordanians are looking to their leadership for hope and direction. Some point, for example, to the potentially-unifying symbolism of the Hashimite regime itself, particularly in the form of Abdullah II as a Hashimite Jordanian king and his wife, Queen Rania, who is of Palestinian origin. Certainly some Palestinian Jordanians are hopeful that this translates to more than symbolism, with a King and Queen literally representing a marriage of Transjordanian- and Palestinian-... *Jordanians*.

## The Role of Religion in Society and Politics

Islam is the official state religion within Jordan, with the overwhelming majority of the population following the Sunni Islamic tradition, and the Hashimite monarchy has throughout its existence pointedly emphasized its Islamic lineage. King Hussein in particular made clear the direct Hashimite family line descending from the Prophet Muhammad. Yet despite its Islamic familial credentials, Hashimite Jordan remains largely a secular state, without the religious overtones that one finds in Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Jordan also has a long history of religious tolerance and support for religious minorities. Jordan's Christian minorities, who account for perhaps five percent of the country's population, enjoy full political rights, including freedom of religion and the right to attend churches and Christian religious schools if they so desire. The Hashimite kings have tended to rely on strong support from Christians and other minorities, and have supported various centers, conferences, and institutes focused on Christian-Muslim understanding. While some Christians are stalwart supporters of the Hashimite regime, others have played major roles in Jordan's opposition movement, especially through left-wing political parties.

It is here in fact – in the politics of opposition – that one finds the most extensive levels of religious-based activism in the kingdom. As noted above in the discussion of regime and opposition, Jordan's Islamist movement remains by far the largest and best-organized component of political opposition in the kingdom, and it is indeed as old as the Hashimite monarchy itself. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Syria, the Jordanian movement has enjoyed a more cooperative relationship with the Jordanian state as a loyal opposition organization. And unlike Hamas, neither the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood nor its legal political party -- the Islamic Action Front (*Jabha al-'Amal al-Islami*) -- has a militant wing, and both instead focus on civilian party and interest group organization and remain very much a part of the pro-democratization movement in the kingdom (Schwedler 2006).

Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood therefore stands in sharp contrast to more militant and even terroristic religious organizations, such as al-Qa'ida. This point was brought home in a particularly horrible way on November 9, 2005, when al-Qa'ida suicide bombers simultaneously attacked several Jordanian hotels in central Amman. The attacks have thereafter been considered "Jordan's 9-11" and killed 60

people while wounding hundreds. The terrorists turned out to be Iraqi nationals who had crossed the border into Jordan on the orders of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a former Jordanian national who became the head of al-Qa'ida in Iraq.

Yet most Jordanians -- secular and religious, royalist and Islamist, regime supporters and opponents -- united in condemning these attacks. In doing so, and despite the many real and divisive issues in Jordanian politics, they also underscored two major features of Jordanian political life: that the kingdom has a long tradition of moderation and tolerance between and among religions (including most Jordanian Islamists), and that opposition in the kingdom in general has rarely turned to violence or terrorism, but rather has been based in grassroots activism for reform and change.

## Economic Liberalization

Given its minimal resource endowments, the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan has throughout its history been dependent on foreign assistance to keep its economy afloat. With limited arable land and chronic problems of adequate water supply, agriculture remains a small part of Jordan's overall economy. Indeed, given the small agricultural base in the country, Jordan imports far more food than it exports. That pattern actually applies also more broadly, since a chronic trade deficit is a standard feature of the Jordanian economy.

Like the agricultural sector, the manufacturing base is also small, with the bulk of the economy concentrated in the service sector. The Kingdom has few natural resources, but does manage to exploit those minerals it does possess, particularly phosphates and potash. It also manufactures and exports cement and fertilizers. Under King Abdullah II, Jordan has moved steadily away from a state-dominated or public sector economy, toward economic openness (infitah), increasing levels of privatization, and an overall emphasis on Neoliberal economic policies.

Jordan's main resource has been and remains its people. Jordanians tend to have very high levels of education, and have therefore been able to take advantage of skilled labor and service sector job opportunities in other countries in the region, especially those in the Gulf. Worker remittances are thus a major component of the Jordanian economy. So many Jordanians work out of the country, in fact, that the kingdom is both a major labor importer as well as a labor exporter. Workers from Sudan and especially Egypt, for example, work in many of the lower-skilled jobs within the kingdom, while Jordanian citizens are more likely to work in private or state businesses, in the skilled service sector, or in jobs in the Gulf states.

With foreign aid remaining a large part of state revenue, and hence a critical source of state expenditures, the Jordanian economy is highly vulnerable to regional and global tensions affecting its labor and aid partners. Jordan is, in short, a semi-rentier economy, meaning that it relies heavily on external sources of income or "rents". The rentier idea is thus usually associated with extensive natural resource endowments and extractive industries. But in the Middle East context, with the regional political economy of oil, even non-oil states have become deeply linked to the overall petroleum economy. Jordan is thus a "semi-rentier" economy not because of its own minimal oil (it

remains an importer of oil) but rather because its major sources of both expatriate remittances and foreign aid are based in the Gulf oil states (Brand 1992, Brynen 1992).

Since 1989, when Jordan's debt crisis had triggered IMF restructuring (and political unrest), Jordan has pressed forward with its agenda of privatization and economic liberalization. King Abdullah has made clear his conviction that Jordan's future lies in economic development – including privatization of the state's companies as well as encouraging foreign investment. In doing so, he is challenging a resistant and to some extent entrenched elite of state managers. But he is also creating an alternative constituency of like-minded elites who share his enthusiasm for Neoliberal solutions to Jordan's development. This has been reflected increasingly in the king's political appointments, and the tendency for top cabinet posts to go to technocratic elites with experience in Jordan's industrial and trade zones. The make-up of the government itself thus underscores the absolutely central emphasis of Abdullah's regime on economic development as one of its top priorities. As one of King Abdullah's former cabinet ministers noted, "development is what defines him."<sup>3</sup>

When examining privatization in Jordan today, then, it is important to remember that there has been no time in modern Jordanian history when the public sector did not outweigh the private sector. The difficulty in reversing this trend is to some extent rooted in that early period of state formation, when the state ensured support among domestic coalitions of elites precisely through patronage ties in the public sector. In his analysis of the limits of market reform in Jordan, Timothy Piro has argued that elite resistance to changing these state-society ties and forms of patronage is the single largest obstacle to privatization. What has emerged, then, is a privatization program alongside a continued large role for the state in economic planning (Piro 1998).

In day to day operations, the state companies essentially operate much like a private sector firm would. But the chairs of the corporate boards are appointees of the prime minister, and there tends to be a great deal of circulation of elites between government posts and positions in the public sector companies. This patronage, and the nepotism often associated with it, has historically been a key to Hashimite regime survival. Public sector dominance has also been ensured through centralized decision-making on production. Thus beyond the individual companies themselves, the government has played an enormous economic role through the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Ministry of Supply, and the Ministry of Planning. The ministries themselves, much like the public sector

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with the author. Amman, July 2001.

companies, tend to have overlapping jurisdictions and bloated bureaucracies (Abu Shair 1997:136-137).

Privatization must therefore be approached cautiously, mindful of its social impact, because the state-owned-enterprises also play positive roles as sources of employment (Abu Shair 1997: 128). The danger, of course, is when precisely this type of project benefits entrepreneurial elites while inflicting the costs of adjustment, privatization, and restructuring on the already least-empowered sectors of Jordanian society. And that perception is certainly what prompted the IMF riots of 1989 and 1996.

Still, the regime has not wavered from its Neoliberal path. Jordan has even become the summer host to annual meetings of the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the regime continues to make clear that its priorities include economic development, continuing privatization, expanding trade, and luring international investment.

With these goals in mind, the regime also aggressively pursued trade agreements with its key Western allies. In 2000, Jordan entered the World Trade Organization and later that same year the kingdom also signed a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. In 2001, Jordan joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) strengthening still further its ties to the European Union. In addition to his emphasis on free trade, King Abdullah also pushed for Jordan to become a regional center for information technology and communications.

The government's overall economic development aims are therefore clear, but restructuring remains a colossal task, and one with profound social and political ramifications. In a fairly harsh assessment of the record of reform under King Abdullah, a director of one Jordanian NGO argued that "King Abdullah did have some intentions for change. He talked of opening the press ... (but) he doesn't seem to want reform. The focus is on economic reform. Political reform is just talk. The official rhetoric in speeches is that the Islamists are the reactionaries, and the king is the reformer. But it's not entirely true. The Islamists keep adjusting, moderating, and pressing for real reforms."<sup>4</sup>

As Western stores, fast food chains, and other businesses continue to multiply in Jordan, and as the capital itself continues to expand rapidly, the larger questions still remain not just those of trade and

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, Amman, 2005.

investment, but also those of poverty alleviation, uneven development, and continuing high levels of unemployment. These latter questions are the focus of many opposition parties and activists, who hope to push the *political* liberalization process forward, in part to alleviate some of the hardships of *economic* liberalization.

## Political Opposition, Liberalization, and Deliberalization in Jordan

King Hussein, who led Jordan's political development from the early 1950's to his death in 1999, set a pattern for Jordanian politics by developing the power of the Jordanian state while also allowing intermittent and minimal levels of pluralism. The Jordanian state under the Hashimite regime thus never developed the level of authoritarianism found in neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, or (for most of its existence) Iraq. But neither was pluralism allowed to flourish if it in any way challenged the state. For that reason, Jordan was often regarded as semi-authoritarian or, to use a more recent phrase, as a "soft" authoritarian regime. It is in that sense a "hybrid" regime, with both authoritarian features and some level of liberalization (Ryan and Schwedler 2004).

Since the political liberalization process began, Jordan has seen fairly routine national parliamentary elections (1989, 1993, 1997, 2003, and 2007). Opposition in Jordan has traditionally come from two broad categories: secular, left-leaning, activists (including communists as well as Ba'thists and other Pan-Arab nationalists) and Islamist activism. The latter category is by far the more influential and historically the best-organized aspect of opposition in the kingdom. As noted above, the Islamist movement in Jordan is based mainly in Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement as old as the Hashimite regime itself, and the movement's political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) (Wiktorowicz 2000a).

For its part, the Jordanian regime heralded the political liberalization process as the most extensive in the entire Arab world, and in many respects that assessment was accurate. The process began to change, however, as the kingdom secured its 1994 peace treaty with Israel. Thereafter, regime tolerance for dissent declined precipitously. The opposition had, in fact, surprised regime loyalists by taking more than half the seats in parliament after the first elections, in 1989 (with Islamists taking 34 of the 80 seats). In response, the regime changed the electoral law for the 1993 elections, switching to a one-person one-vote system. The previous electoral law had allowed citizens a number of votes matching the number of representatives for their respective (multi-member) parliamentary district. A new electoral law ended this practice and also featured a set of uneven electoral districts that favored rural pro-regime constituencies over more urban bases of support for opposition groups from the secular left to the religious right.

In a sense, the regime was both mobilizing and containing political opposition. The strategy worked, and not surprisingly the Islamists as well as secular leftist parties lost seats in the 1993 elections. Jordan's opposition parties then threatened an electoral boycott in 1997 unless the electoral law was changed. When no such revision took place, the IAF led an 11 party bloc in boycotting the 1997 elections, yielding a 1997-2001 parliament dominated by pro-regime conservatives, tribal leaders, and very few opposition voices. That parliament, pliant though it was, was dissolved by the king in 2001, rendering the kingdom with no active parliament for more than two years. In the absence of parliament, the palace ruled by decree, issuing a series of controversial emergency and temporary laws.

But in June 2003 the new elections were finally held under still another electoral law. The new law, announced in July 2001, lowered the age of voting eligibility for men and women from 19 to 18, and increased the number of parliamentary seats from 80 to 104, with new (but still uneven) electoral districts. As noted above, King Abdullah later added to the changes with a new decree adding six more parliamentary seats in a specific quota to ensure minimal representation for women. The 2003 elections were also important in that they were the first under King Abdullah, and they represented a return of the opposition (after the 1997 boycott) to electoral and parliamentary politics. In those elections, pro-regime conservatives, as usual, won most of the seats, but the Islamic Action Front did manage to gain 17 seats, with five more going to independent Islamists.

The next round of elections, held in November 2007, produced a resounding defeat for Jordan's Islamist movement. But this came with considerable controversy about the process itself. The Islamic Action Front charged the government with vote-rigging, and then announced its withdrawal from the electoral process, but only on election day itself. The government responded by arguing that the Islamists were merely attempting to save face in the midst of a certain electoral defeat. When the vote-counting was completed, the Islamists had dropped from 17 seats to a mere six, having even lost in districts where they enjoy substantial support, such as Irbid and Zarqa. It may be that both sides – the Islamist movement and the Hashimite regime – were reacting to the 2006 electoral success of Hamas in the Palestinian territories. The government reacted with alarm, and attempted to thwart any sign of a Hamas-like turn within Jordan's own Islamist movement. Yet simultaneously the IAF was inspired by the nearby elections and may have overplayed its hand (Susser 2008). The 2007 elections, in short, may have signaled a change in the regime's approach to its opponents, and especially its Islamist opposition. For most of their existence, the Hashimites had pursued strategies

of dividing or containing their political opponents (Lust-Okar 2004, 2006). But now, there seemed to be a more confrontational tone emerging both from the state and from more hawkish elements within the Islamist movement itself (Ryan 2008).

Despite differences in ideological or even religious orientation, opposition parties of all types in Jordan actually agree on several things. Most have been sharply critical of the peace treaty with Israel, for example. They demand that the regime cease normalizing relations with Israel, and some even demand the abolition of the treaty itself. Within domestic politics and policy, the opposition parties also insist that future prime ministers and cabinets should be drawn from parliament in a truer model of a parliamentary system, rather than royally-appointed pending only the formality of parliamentary approval. IAF deputies are particularly engaged in this debate, arguing that with more even electoral districts they might win 40 to 50 percent of the vote. These Islamists remain certain that their “street” support greatly exceeds their current parliamentary power. Thus the IAF argues that a more truly democratic election law would allow the alleged Islamist street majority to one day become a governing coalition. While the Islamists do indeed have a point regarding the unevenness of electoral districts, they have nonetheless never even approached a majority of the popular vote under any electoral law, and hence their arguments about their de facto “majority” remain dubious to say the least.

Still, whether rooted in Islam, or Pan-Arab nationalist, or in secular leftist ideas, political opposition in the Jordan has tended to struggle with the regime over policy and the direction of the state (including demands for greater democratization), but has not tended to challenge the nature of the state itself as a Hashimite monarchy.

## Civil Society

When the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan first emerged, the monarchy established itself immediately as the premier and centralized political power in the emerging Jordanian state. As the Jordanian state developed, civil society, like the economic basis for the new state, was weak. And hence the government itself almost immediately filled these gaps, establishing a large role for the public sector in the economy (a legacy undergoing transformation only today), ensuring a similarly large role for the military in backing the political regime, and finally, co-opting the fragmented aspects of much of civil society into the new Hashimite political order (Brand 1995).

It is important to recall, however, that the current liberalization process, now entering its twentieth year, was a regime response to grassroots mobilization. And that mobilization, in turn, had emerged from an economic crisis. Thus reform, liberalization, and the development of civil society in Jordan are not mainly responses to relatively recent Western overtures. And these initiatives are certainly not responses to the democratization initiatives of the Bush administration. If anything, the Bush era policies seemed to harm grassroots reform movements in the kingdom, implicating them in a broader imperial project, and leading many NGO's to avoid U.S. ties (but not necessarily European ties) as "instantly delegitimizing."<sup>5</sup> As one analyst and democracy activist argued:

U.S. foreign policy has harmed reformers more than helped them. Because it is difficult to be in any way associated with the United States, and especially with the Bush administration. Still there is more pressure on the table than in the past. But it is not as principled as the U.S. claims. They compromised with the Saudis and with Qaddafi in Libya. But the foreign factor is over estimated. That the U.S. can produce waves of democracy is just ideology. Foreign intervention brought us capitalism, colonialism, penicillin, aspirin, all kinds of good and bad things. We do need some of it. But we shouldn't over estimate their own significance.<sup>6</sup>

Civil society has, nonetheless, continued to emerge in Jordan, especially in the wake of the political and economic liberalization process. There are times, however, when "political society" and "civil society" in Jordan are actually difficult to tell apart. In 1997, for example, after the Islamist movement

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with the author, Amman, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author, Amman, 2005.

led the opposition boycott of the parliamentary elections, the resulting parliament naturally proved to be overwhelmingly conservative, nationalist, and pro-Hashimite. With only 6 independent Islamists in the new parliament, and none whatsoever from the IAF, Islamist strength and strategy shifted from parties and parliament, toward the professional associations instead. Thus a key element of civil society became instantly politicized. In short order, Islamist candidates won the leadership posts of almost every professional association in the kingdom (e.g. engineers, pharmacists, medical doctors), thereby creating a basis for Islamist political activism outside the halls of parliament, but very much across Jordanian civil society. In some ways, however, this simply signaled a return to activism in its more traditional form, since the participation in professional associations had preceded the legalization of political parties, and thus the associations continue to be organizationally stronger and more politically influential than the kingdom's weak and under-developed political parties (Hourani et. al. 2000).

But beyond the numerous legal political parties and professional associations within the kingdom, the key facets of Jordan's still-emerging civil society (as opposed to more explicitly political society) include the many non-governmental organizations (NGO's) within the kingdom. Yet while these civic organizations are themselves independent, they nonetheless retain legal links to the state, since all NGO's register with the General Union of Voluntary Societies. State regulations also constrain the NGO's from exercising complete independence, as charitable NGO's come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Development, while cultural and social NGO's are regulated by the Ministry of Culture. Islamic NGO's are also permitted (and indeed have proliferated) in Jordan, but only if they pursue civic and social -- rather than political -- activism. Islamic NGO's, for example, may distribute religious literature or offer religious classes, but they may not campaign for Islamist candidates (Wiktorowicz 2002).

While NGO's have proliferated in Jordan, especially since the 1989 liberalization process began, the largest and most active organizations in the kingdom are actually Royal NGO's -- also known as RONGO's. These are organizations headed by a member of the royal family, a prince or princess who acts as royal patron of the group. These Hashimite NGO's include, for example, the Women's Resources Center (led by Princess Basma), the Arab Thought Forum (Prince Hassan), the Noor al-Hussein Foundation (former Queen Noor), and the Jordan River Foundation (Queen Rania). Thus in the Jordanian context, civic and social activism is based not only on NGO's, but also on RONGO's, which in turn provide myriad services to the population, but also maintain a level of social and

political control over civil society itself (Clarke 2004, Wiktorowicz 2000b, 2002). Similarly, Jordanian workers are allowed to organize through trade unions, but these must then be approved and incorporated into the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions. In short, seemingly pluralist forms of social, economic, and civic activism are perhaps best seen as corporatist in organization, as the state both mobilizes and contains participation of citizens in public life.

Although Jordan's NGO's can be counted among the most democratic organizations in the country, they have sometimes been the subject of maneuvers to curb their potential influence. Since 2000 especially, the government has at times focused on the "foreign connections" of these groups. Most, of course, have global connections and just as obviously draw on sources of funding outside of the kingdom. But some government officials, followed dutifully by many of the more pliant organs of the Jordanian media, have continued to focus on these groups virtually as foreign infiltrators. This type of maneuver is, of course, quite old in Jordanian politics. Internationalist left-wing parties from the communists to the Ba'thists found themselves subjected to similar charges from the 1950's onward. But in the modern era of liberalization, and under a regime that openly embraces globalization, it seems particularly odd to criticize organizations for having global links. It is still more odd that some of the more conservative organizations and associations fall in step with this critique themselves (particularly the Islamists). Just as they tend to be suspicious of the communist and Ba'thist parties, the Islamists are also suspicious of what they see as the too-Western links of many NGO's, especially feminist, pro-democracy, and human rights organizations.

Yet NGO's everywhere tend to have external links, including even such RONGO's as the Noor al-Hussein Foundation, which maintains links with the World Health Organization (WHO), and the National Task Force for Children, which coordinates its efforts with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). In addition, the Jordanian government itself directly receives millions of dollars (US\$600 million in 2006) from the United States and the European Union aimed specifically at developing civil society and deepening democratization in the kingdom (Human Rights Watch 2007).

Another key aspect of civil society, however, is independent media, and indeed the loosening of restrictions on the media beginning in 1989 was a central pillar of the initial liberalization program. The immediate proliferation of weekly publications and the emphasis of some of them on exposing scandals apparently tried the patience of regime officials – many of whom were skeptical about the very idea of democratization. A new Press and Publications Law in 1993 was heralded by some as a

step toward democracy, since it replaced legislation in effect since 1973 and hence during the martial law period. But the law also required that journalists be members of the Jordan Press Association (JPA) – a government body. Individual journalists have continually criticized this feature of the many different versions of press laws that have been handed down since 1989, since they see it as compromising their independence and hence running counter to civil society.

Since then, several other press laws (1997, 2007) have emerged, each replacing an earlier version, and oscillating between greater and lesser restrictions on freedom of the press. Still, while the debate continues regarding press restrictions, Jordan does allow for the dissemination of a plethora print media sources -- such as independent magazines, newspapers, and even tabloids – in addition to open access to countless news sources via the internet. Jordan is far ahead of Syria, for example, in terms of “wiring” the country for internet access and, for that matter, cell phone service. To be blunt, Jordanians are in no way beholden to the state in order to get news and information about national, regional, or global affairs. Yet at the same time, given the ambiguous and elastic laws against articles harming national security, journalists in often practice some level of self-censorship. One NGO activist, echoing a charge made by many Jordanian journalists, argued that “*Mukhabarat* (intelligence service) infiltration of the weeklies is extensive ... They are not really independent minded newspapers, but *mukhabarat*. And they are especially critical of Palestinian ministers.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus overall, despite the clear importance of the topic of civil society to democracy and democratization, it is actually difficult to characterize the status of civil society in the kingdom in general terms. Recent analyses by global institutions and NGO’s, for example, differ strongly in their assessments. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) sees Jordan at the forefront of civil society development in the Arab Middle East, arguing that “Jordanian civil society organizations (CSOs) enjoy one of the most favorable political environments in the Arab world for participating in their country’s political liberalization” (UNDP).<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, in contrast, has been especially critical of restrictions on NGO funding, constraints on public assembly, and the government’s take-over of the longstanding charitable wing of Jordan’s Islamist movement, the Islamic Center Society. The Jordanian government also took control of the General Union of Voluntary Societies (GUVS), which serves as an umbrella or hub for a host of NGO’s throughout the kingdom. Sarah Whitson, Middle East Director of Human Rights Watch, concluded that “while promising to foster civil society,

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author. Amman, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> UNDP-POGAR, Programme on Governance in the Arab Region, Theme: Civil Society: Jordan (<http://www.pogar.org/countries/theme.aspx?t=2&cid=7>)

Jordanian authorities have made life more difficult for nongovernmental groups. The government is using oppressive laws and practices to shut out private citizens from peacefully participating in public policy debates” (Human Rights Watch 2007).

The restrictions on financing and assembly, however, are clearly aimed at containing the more political aspects of civil society, and more rarely pertain to more culturally or educationally-oriented NGO's. Despite its many limitations, civil society in Jordan has indeed progressed beyond that of most other countries in the region, especially Syria and Iran. Indeed, regardless of the state's continual attempts to curb more political aspects of civil society, several Jordanian NGO's dedicated to more democracy in the kingdom pooled their efforts in advance of the 2007 national elections, by forming the Jordanian Civil Alliance for Democratic Elections (JOCADE). This effort was led by the al-Urdun al-Jadid (New Jordan) Research Center, which has been at the forefront of civil society analysis since the early 1990's ([www.ujrc-jordan.org](http://www.ujrc-jordan.org)).

Indeed, al-Urdun al-Jadid has produced numerous books on civil society, professional associations, political parties, and the state of democratization in the kingdom (e.g. Hourani et. al. 1993, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004). The center is also active in dialogue and training, and has led a series of study meetings between civil society leaders and government officials (in 2006, 2007, and 2008), in an effort to train NGO's and further the development of civil society in the kingdom. Finally, the center has catalogued the various organizations operating in Jordan, concluding that these fall into no less than 14 different categories. Specifically, the many civil society organizations within Jordan include charities, professional associations, cultural associations, youth and sports clubs, human rights and democratic development organizations, political parties, women's rights organizations, labor unions, business associations, environmentalist groups, healthcare societies, educational societies, research centers, and finally, foreign NGO's with branch offices in Jordan. By 2006, the al-Urdun al-Jadid Research Center had catalogued 1, 827 civil society organizations in Jordan and produced a detailed directory (including contact information) of all of them (Kassim 2006).

As the above discussion of civil society and liberalization in Jordan has made clear, the door of significant reform opened twenty years ago, but has since then remained perhaps half open, as the state, political opposition, and civil society have struggled ever since over the nature and depth of change in the kingdom. Civil society itself is therefore no panacea for democracy, and it can at times seem to be a façade masking a milder form of social control, as an alternative to outright coercion

(Wiktorowicz 2000). But the political opening that this entails, even if intended to be limited (as is the case in Jordan), nonetheless provides space and opportunities for those with more progressive visions than those of the government itself. Having created the beginning of a civil society in the kingdom, even the acts of deliberalization come to be discussed in the public sphere, albeit at times cautiously or even with self-censorship. But while the process has slipped since the mid 1990's, it has not slid backwards to the pre-1989 period.

Today, unlike the era before 1989, extensive polling data is produced by such impressive institutions as the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies (CSS). The CSS ([www.css-jordan.org](http://www.css-jordan.org)) routinely publishes polls tracking levels of public satisfaction in government, as well as polls on political, social, and civic attitudes. Detailed analyses of the press, parties, associations, and other aspects of the liberalization process are produced and disseminated from the independent al-Urdun al-Jadid Research Center. And NGO's such as the Arab Archives Institute now link to global human rights organizations such as Transparency International and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network. These can indeed be counted as among the most positive and hopeful features on the Jordanian political landscape.

Similarly, within the state itself, King Abdullah appointed the kingdom's former foreign minister, Marwan Muasher, to be Deputy Prime Minister for Reform. In that capacity, Muasher led a broad-based committee of Jordanians (drawn from government and society) in creating the National Agenda. That effort calls for deeper reform within the kingdom, including the rights of women and deepening Jordan's nascent civil society specifically. In that context, Muasher notes that even the concept of civil society has sometimes been reduced to include only charitable NGO's, and not also political parties, professional associations, and trade unions, effectively de-politicizing the concept. He calls instead for a broader conceptualization of civil society, to include all of these types of organizations, independent of the state itself – with goals ranging from social, to economic, to political. In this way, he argues, political liberalization (in Jordan and elsewhere) can finally move forward, but only with a strengthened civil society as its base (Muasher 2008).

The Agenda, however, was met with overt hostility by many anti-reform hardliners within the regime, with suspicion by the Islamist movement, and with considerable indifference on the part of a Jordanian public that seems to have grown tired of new initiatives and new slogans. In the words of one NGO activist, "we have many regime slogans: think big, act big; Jordan first; political

development; the national agenda – these are western style marketing slogans. They work more for marketing outside the country, but not inside the country.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, another NGO director argued that:

This is the problem, the contradiction between speeches and implementation. We have now had Jordan First, political development and the new ministry for it, and now the national agenda. Continually new programs are launched, but still with little effect. Little actual involvement. The quota for women, for example, or the national center for human rights, these are both ok but very small steps. The national center for human rights, for instance, is not actually fully independent of the government. These are advances in relatively small details ... We don't suffer like the people of Syria or Saudi Arabia, but we don't need to compare ourselves to them. We are stable and have a better economic situation. But why do we have to pay a political price for this? This should simply be the norm. We have a mature and educated population. Few listen to the real extremists here. Palestinians for example may have real grievances but we don't see mobs in the street. We all try to solve things with soft pressure.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, many Jordanians are looking to a young and reformist king to tip the scales back toward liberalization and away from the conservative retrenchment that has undone much of that same process. What is perhaps just as compelling about this is the determination of many independent organizations or institutes to press on in their attempts to build civil society and more meaningful democratization. The efforts of these individuals and groups nonetheless run headlong into a core of the ruling elite that does indeed see democratization and all its trappings as a completed mission. For many regime conservatives the liberalization process already occurred, and it includes strict parameters intended to give a showy and pluralist façade to an established pattern of power and privilege. But even the cynicism on the part of old guard or hardline elements within the Jordanian state, coupled with the trends toward backsliding and deliberalization since 1994, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there are real reformers within the state itself, as well as energetic democracy activists independent of the state who are working to create a more effective civil society and a return to more extensive liberalization.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with the author, Amman, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, Amman, 2005.

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## About the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

The paper is produced in the framework of the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Syria and Iran can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this.

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