

‘Quiet Spring’: Jordan and the 2011 Arab Uprisings

In Jordan, as elsewhere, it started with the streets. And it began early, before Egypt’s great hulk stirred. The cradle of the protest movement was Dhiban, a sleepy appendage to the town of Madaba, 30km south of Amman and previously known to the outside world for its well-preserved Byzantine mosaics. The 7th January demonstration was an amorphous affair, centred on high living costs and inspired by events in Tunisia (then a historic, but not yet world-changing upheaval which – for some – was beginning to threaten President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali). Youth members of the Jordanian Social Leftist Movement were among the few politically organised elements involved at Dhiban, catching the attention of their Secretary General, Dr Khaled Kalaldehy, and planting the idea – bold at the time – of a rematch in the capital the following Friday. “I talked to the youth sector in our movement”, Dr Kalaldehy recalls. “I said, ‘if you can march with 200 people it will be very good.’ We were 5,000.” Viewed from outside the retrospective determinism already so embedded in our understanding of the ‘Arab Spring’, the 14th January Amman demonstration was, for a moment, like a thunderbolt to regional politics: it announced the first seeping beyond Tunisian borders of a collective Arab call for a better life.

The protest was of the kind now so familiar to the story of the 2011 uprisings: driven by youth activists, amateur political entrepreneurs, and giving voice to a generalised discontent. “We had no political flags... Each group made their own slogans, and at the beginning it was a mess... everybody started pushing in. You had too many slogans all over the place”, admits Kamal Khoury, a 25 year-old activist of the Social Leftist Movement, with evident satisfaction. Dr Kalaldehy’s party operates as an unregistered movement, thereby avoiding many of the State’s bureaucratic levers of opposition management, but established political parties were slow to declare themselves for the protests. “No one was with us,” Kamal affirms, “and we approached almost every group in the country.” Yet the non-partisan tone and the universality of the demands (one popular banner featured the flat, circular bread of the region, sometimes adorned with an unsmiling smiley-face, with the tag line *‘ayna anta ya azizi?’*, ‘where are you, my dear?’) drew the crowds downtown: the Jordanian protest movement was born. The following morning the world awoke to news of the flight of President Ben Ali, and events across the region took on a new significance.

While all this was going on, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood had been exerting itself in a campaign to rid Amman of a clutch of nightclubs, because they happened to be in a place called

Mecca Street. But while they undoubtedly came late to the party, they would, like their counterparts in Egypt, make it their own. On the 28th January – the third consecutive Friday demonstration in Amman – the Brotherhood turned up in force, replete with the famous green flags, crossed-swords logo and all the panoply of Islamic activism. This appeared to breach the universalist spirit of the early protests, and the result was polarized: “Everyone detached themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood demonstration. You had two demonstrations at the same time.” But it hardly mattered. With its great knack for organised, institutionalised activity, the Brotherhood, and its formal political party, the Islamic Action Front, eased into a leadership position in the nascent protest movement. For a time, a formation called ‘24 March Youth’ acted as an umbrella group for young activists and, inviting comparison with Egypt’s much larger ‘6 April Youth Movement’, was seized upon by media sources as the recognisable face of Jordan’s Arab Spring. Today, it is dominated by the Brotherhood. Without giving precise figures, senior Brotherhood members confirm that a “very good percentage” of the 24 March Youth belong to their movement. According to Kamal, there are now only two surviving non-Islamist members. One he names on the spot; the other, “a former Communist”, requires a bit of head-scratching.

Even as the composition of the protest movement was in flux, the focus of its demands was changing hourly. What began as, and in large part remains, a non-ideological expression of outrage and desperation at high prices and low quality of life became, with startling rapidity, a determined conversation about the meaning of politics in Jordan. Already by the second Amman protest people were talking about the constitution, and calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Samir Rifa’i. Some would even talk about the King. Often, this ultimate taboo was skirted artfully: one poster featured an image of a Queen chess-piece – which Arabs call the ‘*wazir*’, ‘minister’ – with the slogan ‘*kish wazir*’, ‘Check minister’. What would have been obvious to all observers was that, in the Arabic version of the game, the final move carries the verbal flourish *kish malek* – ‘Check King’.

Understandably perturbed, Abdullah II moved to defuse the crisis in time-honoured Hashemite fashion, turning the guns not on protestors but on the politicians: on 1 February the King sacked the entire government. Outside the region, the move was widely hailed as ‘progressive’, clear evidence of the King’s foresight. The status of Jordanian Prime Ministers as ‘shock absorbers’ has long been noted: with a few historical exceptions, it would be only mildly unfair to say that heads

of government have traditionally been most valuable to the Kings of Jordan when clearing out their desks. But this time things were different, and protesters were strangely unmoved. If anything, activists told me, the protests increased. Certainly, the choice of replacement Prime Minister was uninspired: Marouf al-Bakhit, a returnee to the job whose previous tenure was mainly notable for a flamboyantly dishonest set of elections in 2007. More significantly, however, people had come to recognise the hiring and firing of unelected politicians as the sideshow it had always been. “We don’t like him, of course”, one activist concluded of Bakhit in August. “But he’s just another slave like us.” Sure enough, Bakhit himself got the boot in October, and the third government of the year was duly ushered in. On current form, Prime Ministerial tenure is a matter of months.

Engineer Ghaith al-Qudah, Chairman of the Islamic Action Front Youth Section, exudes the confidence of a man whose life’s work is moving towards a satisfying, providential climax. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1986 as a fifteen year-old schoolboy, and was an early recruit to the Islamic Action Front after its establishment in 1992. “We start early with the Muslim Brotherhood, from the schools.... we pick them early.” A direct participant in a fair chunk of the convoluted political dance that has characterised the Brotherhood’s relationship with the modern Jordanian state, Ghaith does not disguise a perception that his movement is on a roll. For ten years, he says, the Brotherhood requested meetings with King Abdullah – and was fobbed off like a cheap date. Evasive messages kept trickling back from the Palace: the King was very busy, and perhaps now was not the best time. Not long into 2011, Brotherhood leaders got the call. “After the Arab Spring started in Tunisia, and in Egypt, the King himself called”. At the ensuing sit-down, he offered “a new page” in relations and appealed for the Brotherhood’s help in fighting corruption and leading reform. This was a historic offer of participation in the reconstituted government; it was strongly implied that they could virtually take their pick of ministerial portfolios. The Brotherhood response was to flex its muscles on the street, and find them strong.

The anatomy of the protest movement was laid bare at an expressive piece of human theatre in downtown Amman on 9th September. This was the first major outing after the Ramadan lull, and the crowds were substantial. Security forces in the capital take few chances, and expressions of popular outrage are carefully stage-managed in a manner by now familiar to all involved. People

congregated outside al-Husseiny Mosque after Friday prayers, and from there began a slow, regimented march to Al Nakheel Square, where, after a series of speeches and a period of chanting, they briskly dispersed. Though the distance was short, the affair lasted several hours. Gendarmes and police lined the streets in great numbers, and a phalanx of officers brought up the rear to move stragglers along. Behind them, a contingent of jump-suited street-cleaners, provided, it would seem, to restore the appearance of normality as promptly as possible.

The nature of the demonstration as a *maseera*, ‘march’, betrayed one of the beefiest ‘red-lines’ of political activism in the Kingdom. On 24 March, the youth conglomeration of the same name seized Duwar Dakhliyya, a roundabout and transport hub in central Amman, and declared an *e’tisam maftouh*, an ‘open sit-in’. Tents were pitched, and for a day and a night the congregation – characterised by all the participants I spoke to as predominantly young and politically diverse – maintained the protest in a jubilant mood. Slogans were heard maligning the Director of General Intelligence. Gradually over the course of the night, a crowd of counter-demonstrators formed. Amidst intermittent stone-throwing, the chanting of the new arrivals (deemed by many to have been bussed-in) accused the original protesters of being divisive outsiders – Palestinians, Shia Muslims sent by Iran – and loudly ventured that if their opponents insisted on staying out all night, they might just go and have their way with their sisters. In the early evening of 25th March, police stood by as *baltajiyya* (‘thugs’; lit: ‘axe-wielders’) attacked from two directions to clear the Duwar, leaving one protestor dead and several with stab-wounds. The event has been widely acknowledged as the most significant in domestic Jordanian politics for several years, and the message was clear: the Jordanians will not be permitted their Tahrir.

The resulting ritual-march of early September could not have offered a more vivid embodiment of the protest movement. The mass consisted of two distinct enclaves, each following its own pickup truck-mounted microphone stage. The leftist and non-partisan activists formed the vanguard, setting the pace and tone of the march over a tannoy. Here Che Guevara t-shirts were the order of the day, and the men and women of the predominantly young crowd were jumbled together in an animated heap. Following at the head of a much larger host were the Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast to the slightly chaotic atmosphere ahead, this group moved slowly, cautiously, in strictly regimented lines. Senior Brotherhood figures led the column arm-in-arm, flanked by heavies in fluorescent jackets emblazoned with the movement’s crossed-swords symbol. At the end of al-

Hashemi Street, the leftists appeared to melt away as the leaders of the Islamic movement took to the podium to denounce the government as undemocratic and the reform process as flawed. Under the glare of the security forces, Hamam Said, General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, threw down a thinly veiled gauntlet to the King:

“The time has come for comprehensive reform in this country. We want a government elected by this people, and *not appointed by anyone...* The people, united, appoints the government, chooses the government, the Lower and Upper house [the latter, like the Prime Minister, is currently appointed by the King]... the government is accountable to the people *and no one is above this.*”¹

Shortly afterwards, the crowd dispersed through the security bubble, having apparently struck a blow for free expression in the Kingdom. As ever, appearances are misleading. Later I found that a friend of mine, an activist of the Marxist-inspired Hizb al-Wahda ash-Shabiiyya, had been attacked after the march along with a senior figure of his party. They were chased by men with batons and their car was smashed. With great effort, the police were induced to make arrests, but the offending ‘thugs’ later disappeared from the police station and could not be located again.

There is one particular facet of Jordanian society that is shaping the country’s singular dilemma at the crossroads of Arab history: the division between *abna al-asha’ir*, the children of the tribes, and *abna al-mukhayamat*, the children of the camps. On the one side are ranged those Jordanians, often tribally-identified, whose ancestors happened to already be living on the strip of land that became ‘the Emirate of Transjordan’ in 1921. On the other, Jordanians of Palestinian origin, and especially those who came east of the river in the wake of the Arab-Israeli wars. The division is by no means absolute – it appears to be irrelevant to most social interaction, and mixed-marriage is increasingly in evidence – and yet every person I spoke to stressed the seriousness of the fracture, or at least acknowledged its reality. Prodded or not, most people are quick to self-identify to one side, either as ‘true Jordanians’, or with a city or region in Palestine. For all its social ambiguity, “politically,” one Palestinian-origin activist tells me, “it’s the main issue.” The division reflects the turmoil of a state still struggling, nearly a century after its foundation, to formulate a national identity within borders not of its own choosing.

¹ Personal recording in possession of the author.

It impinges on the protest movement in a number of important ways. A persistent stream of propaganda has attempted to portray demonstrations as symptoms of localised Palestinian discontent. The Muslim Brotherhood is similarly painted as an exogenous Palestinian Trojan Horse, despite studious efforts by the movement to marshal East Bankers into its top ranks. Ghaith al-Qudah, himself of Jordanian origin but married to a Palestinian, is quick to stress the cohesion of the two communities: “Jordanians and Palestinians are tight like this [intertwines fingers]. Even our blood is mixed.” But he does not deny the existence of a fault-line: most of the followers of the Brotherhood are indeed Palestinian, drawn from the movement’s strongholds in Amman, Irbid and Zarqa, while “in the towns, in the *mukhabarat* [secret police], they are mostly Jordanian.” Playing to latent rivalries and suspicions “is a game of the Intelligence Department. After the incident at Dakhaliyya Roundabout, the propaganda was that these were Palestinians who don’t like Jordan.” For Ghaith, the Jordanian-Palestinian distinction is “not a big problem, but if the Intelligence Department want to use it, they can – to mislead the country in the direction they want.” Mohamed ‘Abed, a Palestinian activist of the Hizb al-Wahda al-Shabiyya, a leftist party derived from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, agrees: “it’s the last card the government will play to solve their issues. During Dakhaliyya, they went to the towns, to the provinces, to Kerak and Tafileh, and told the people: ‘the Palestinians have occupied Amman. Come free it’.” Partly conjured by such rhetoric, so it appears, was the most significant violent incident of Jordan’s Arab Spring.

The hollowness of this unofficial official narrative is belied by the fact that protests began outside the Palestinian-heavy capital, in a notably East-Banker town. “Protests starting in Dhiban”, one activist opined, “that fucked the government.” A vibrant reformist movement has since emerged in the south of the country. Kerak, one of the largest cities, has become a regional hub – freely described by Amman activists as “the most important city for political demonstration”. New initiatives such as the Kerak Youth Movement and the Tribal Coalition for Reform – an alliance of activists from the Bani Hassan, Bani Sakher, Daaja and Ajarmeh tribes – have shown themselves able to mobilize in their heartlands, as well as being prominent in joint demonstrations in the capital. Indeed it is in the south that popular sentiment appears to be most strident – to an extent that shocks passing activists from Amman. On 14th August a demonstration in Kerak was violently

dispersed by plain-clothed thugs widely thought to be hirelings of the government.² The next day Mohamed ‘Abed and a detachment from Hizb al-Wahda went to the city in solidarity with the head of the party’s local branch, who was stabbed in the mêlée. They joined a follow-up march, and were introduced to a rather more irreverent vocabulary of protest than is customary in the metropole:

*Ya Abdullah Ya Ibn Hussain
Shouf Mubarak saar wayn*

*Hey Abdullah, hey son of Hussain
Take a look at Mubarak: where’s he, eh?*

Or:

*Ash-shab saken bil ijaar
wa Abdullah balab qamaar*

*The people struggle to pay their bills
While Abdullah plays cards for thrills*

Southern protesters think nothing of flouting what is in Amman a final frontier, and remains an offence punishable with up to three years in prison. This confidence reflects the special relationship between the Palace and the East Bank Jordanians, who have provided the regime’s power-base and a reservoir of recruitment for the security forces since the days of Glubb Pasha. Yet it has never been a bond of unthinking loyalty: the support of the south, impoverished and dependent on economic subsidies, is thoroughly performance-based – and can be dramatically withdrawn. In 1989, the government abruptly cut economic subsidies at the instigation of an International Monetary Fund adjustment plan. What followed is remembered locally as *thawrat al-khubz*, the Bread Revolution. As today, protests broke out in the south and spread to the capital. What began as a localised explosion of economic grievances coalesced into a nationwide call for political reform: an end to martial law, legalization of political parties, and the restoration of Parliament. In the midst of a state visit, King Hussein returned from Washington and announced a dizzying set of political reforms, the lifting of martial law imposed since 1957, and new elections. The latter were among the freest ever held in the Arab world and included almost all actors, even the Islamists, who promptly secured 34 out of 80 seats in Parliament. The reforms were successively

² ‘Political parties condemn attack on Karak protestors’, *The Jordan Times*, 14 August 2011, <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=40392>.

qualified once the rioters had returned to their homes, but King Hussein had been deeply shaken by the unrest in the south, as his successor is no doubt rattled today.

The challenge of insurrection from the unambiguously autochthonous population cuts right to the heart of the monarchy's legitimacy. For the Kings, it is remembered in the south, are not actually from Jordan. One of the most scandalous anti-royalist chants calls the Hashemites 'stray dogs from the Hijaz', a reference to the Arabian kingdom from which Abdullah II's great grandfather was expelled by Ibn Sa'ud in 1924. In Ajloun, a Jordanian-origin town in the north, a man showed me his father's identification card, which he carried with him, bearing his Ottoman-era date of birth. "This is my country. My family were here before the Kings." In a sense, this very 'otherness' is the monarchy's great asset: it is seen as the one institution that can adjudicate between Palestinian and Jordanian interests. One tribal source predicted a bloodbath if the mediator were ever to leave: "Worse than Syria. Worse than Iraq!" Yet discontent in the tribal heartlands seems to beg the most dangerous of questions: are the Hashemites Kings of Jordan or Kings *in* Jordan? Even among those Jordanians who express unfakeable pride and affection for their monarchy – or at least, King Hussein – there is a growing dissatisfaction, even embarrassment, with the idea that, in their monopoly on decision-making power, the Kings should continue to *be* Jordan. Dr Ruhayil Ghuraybeh, a Brotherhood leader who hails from a notable Jordanian tribe, states the case bluntly enough: "We can't go on living under a form of government that goes back to the Middle Ages... The King should become the head of state, the symbol of the state [*rumz ad-dawla*], and the people should form their governments with political parties and elections – like any other democracy in the world. There are many states with monarchy *and* democracy." To listen to these thoughts is to wonder how many Husseins there can be.

Reformists are banking on the hope that the south will come to lead the protest movement. Palestinian-dominated regions (such as Amman and Zarqa) and movements (the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Wahda) have adopted a policy of strategic restraint to let the south take centre stage and reveal the demand for change as a pan-Jordanian phenomenon that cannot be dismissed. Some analysts have expressed scepticism that the largely economic (and, indeed, protectionist) grievances of the south can be reconciled with the more politically far-reaching demands of demonstrators in the capital. They point out that the Palestinian majority theoretically

have the most to gain from a democratic opening.³ The events of 1989 provide an example of how localised, economic grievances can spiral into national political reforms, and evidences of a comparable dynamic in the current protests arguably outweigh those hinting at a slide into sectarianism. Much will depend on whether the communal and ideational divide can be bridged once more.

The Arab Spring phenomenon has come to encompass increasingly diverse encounters between Middle Eastern autocracies and peoples. Not surprisingly, most attention has fallen on the paradigmatic revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, and the bloody civil revolts of Libya, Syria, Yemen and, for a time, Bahrain. On the periphery, relatively neglected, lies a more ambiguous ‘third way’: those countries that have not seen regime-change or great bloodshed but have nevertheless experienced profound change in their internal political dynamics as a result of regional events. In Jordan and Morocco, the Kings cast themselves in the role of Reformer-in-Chief, and recommend their model, with its gradualism and veneer of calm, to neighbouring countries. But they are grappling with many of the structural processes that characterise events elsewhere, and have proved so difficult to contain: mass popular mobilization, novel youth activism and engagement, the rise of Islamist opposition, and a quantum leap in the demands for reform. Taken together, these forces constitute something like a revolution in political life.

In Jordan, as in every other country touched by the Arab Spring, the extent of potential or actual change is highly uncertain. Although the reform of political institutions can be a rapid process – one that has already yielded impressive results in Tunisia – the meaningful transformation of political culture is a much longer game. There is a growing realisation that the erosion of deeply entrenched modes of authoritarianism and patronage will require the work of a generation. The uncertainty stems from the nature of the Arab Spring as, to a large extent, a contest of intangibles: how to measure such concepts as dignity and justice, let alone freedom? Yet this does not mean that nothing has changed. The matter becomes rather more tangible when one speaks to those who have experienced the negation of these concepts as a hard, lived reality.

³ Shadi Hamid and Courtney Freer, ‘How Stable is Jordan? King Abdullah’s Half-Hearted Reforms and the Challenge of the Arab Spring’, Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing (Nov. 2011), pp. 4-5.

Beyond any doubt, the parameters of free expression in Jordan have, for now, been radically altered. In late 2009 Moath al-Azzeh, a youth activist of the Social Leftist Movement, was arrested in Amman for spraying graffiti. Perhaps in any society, those who spray paint on walls they don't own can reasonably expect to be arrested. But the special treatment meted out on Azzeh related to the content of his scribbles, which were political. It was fairly mild stuff: demands for better education and healthcare, and anti-privatisation slogans: 'Jordan is not for sale'. Azzeh was taken to a General Intelligence jail, where he was regularly beaten and whipped with cables. "They would stand on my neck, then blindfold me and push me down stairs", he relates. "It was shit, but it was creative. You have to say it was creative." In between sessions, agents pressured him to work as an informant. When Kamal Khoury went looking for his friend ("I told them, whatever he did, I did it too"), they threatened to revoke his citizenship. After a week, Azzeh was transferred to the relatively benign setting of Jumeideh Prison, where he spent a fortnight in general population.

At my last meeting with the Social Leftist activists, Kamal was warming up for a sit-down with the Interior Minister to discuss the ongoing protests. "I think they want things to slow down". To my ears it sounded ominous, but Kamal was typically ebullient. It was to be an informal affair, he told me, held with figures from other political movements over a Ramadan *iftar* meal. "Even three months ago this would be unthinkable", he observed. "Before, we would get just the prison bit."

While constitutional amendments are ping-ponged between the King and the Upper and Lower Houses, of arguably greater significance are the ways in which ordinary Jordanians have already shown themselves able to circumvent official channels and use the informal processes of street protest and mass mobilisation to engineer a change of discourse – and perhaps substance – at the very top. The epicentre of the Arab Spring, Cairo last March was a city of seemingly eternal political activism and agitation, where you couldn't walk the length of a street without having a pamphlet thrust into your hand, or without catching, from the corner of your eye, the glimpse of a crowd gathering and someone mounting a podium, to rail against something or other, or call on so-and-so to do this-or-that. If only fleetingly and on a smaller scale, Amman can at times elicit the same feeling. Driving through University Street one day, I saw a small demonstration in the middle of the thoroughfare. One man appeared to be marshalling a donkey. "That was us, the IAF

youth”, Ghaith laughingly confirmed when I next spoke to him. The pack-animal had symbolised the government’s incompetence in installing a much-vaunted tram-line. Today, protest has become an established feature of Jordanian life, to be undertaken almost at a jocular whim. It was not always so: Kamal shivers to think back to the risks involved in activism before the Arab Spring. “These were not [like] these times. They were at the times where this could simply ruin your, and everyone else’s life around you. The regime would be ruthless... Looking back at it I say: ‘how the fuck did I participate in these things?’”

In Jordan, as in Egypt and Tunisia, the young have claimed a voice in a political culture dominated by the old. Whether they will become an organised force in the longer term is less clear. The youth movements that have become familiar to the outside world through the Arab Spring are not easily absorbed into conventional social science analysis. From graffiti-riddled, smoke-filled dens, they go at politics free-style. Often we tend to assume a cohesiveness and political rationality that such informal networks do not possess. Their non-traditional characteristics, however, are the very things that make them difficult for the established order to rein in, and made the initial breach of the Arab Spring possible. As one elder-statesman of the reformist movement observed:

“These protests and sit-ins were led by the youth – a new generation – without any experience, without any political history. The majority of them had never participated in a political *meeting*, let alone a party... They are enthusiasts... They see they are affecting the street, affecting politics, and on TV they watch the Tunisians and Egyptians. Each starts to show he’s more courageous than the other. If one talks about the Prime Minister, the second needs to talk about the Queen... things accelerating without a plan, without *knowing*...”

“And it works” he adds, laughing with a ring of pride. “It works.”

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