



ISSUE BRIEF

By Danya Greenfield

Jordan's Youth: Avenues for Activism

While Jordanians are focused on the conflict raging in neighboring Syria and the prospect of violence spilling over onto Jordanian soil, below the surface the same kind of political, economic, and social grievances that launched a wave of uprisings in the Arab world are present and intensifying in Jordan with each passing day. As calls for political change swept through Cairo, Tunis, Tripoli, and Sanaa in the spring of 2011, periodic protests emerged throughout Jordan as well, where a diverse mix of people came out in calls for greater freedoms and economic opportunity. Many of the anti-government demonstrations were led by youth, representing a broad spectrum from conservative East Bank tribes to the urban Palestinian-Jordanian elite, and the normally politically apathetic youth population seemed engaged in unprecedented ways. Young Jordanians struggle to land decent jobs, find affordable housing, and save enough money to get married; with 55 percent of the population under the age of twenty-five, and a 26 percent unemployment rate among males between fifteen and twenty-five years old, there is reason to be cognizant about youth discontent emerging in unexpected or critical moments of pressure.

In response to social pressures and weekly youth-led Friday demonstrations, King Abdullah initiated a political reform process meant to usher in constitutional and electoral reform. The results to date, however, have left many disappointed. Political protests reached an apex in March 2012 and peaked again with fuel price hikes that November. While the intensity of opposition activity has fallen dramatically since that time, this is as much owing to external events as it is to domestic changes. Jordanians are

Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East

The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council studies political transitions and economic conditions in Arab countries and recommends US and European policies to encourage constructive change.

witnessing the devastating toll on human life in Syria and an elected Islamist government in Egypt that was dismally ineffective and then overturned. These neighbors have both served as powerful disincentives to revolutionary change and have given Abdullah some significant breathing room—space that could be used to further the reform process, or could be used to buy time without making real concessions. Given the heavy burden Abdullah bears with the largest number of refugees from Syria seeking safety in his territory—and the accompanying pressure on the kingdom's infrastructure, water and electricity sources—it would be highly unlikely to see real progress on the reform front in the near future.

Even though the constant drumbeat of street demonstrations may have waned, the underlying frustrations remain. The rising cost of living is a tremendous burden; in a March 2013 poll¹ conducted by the International Republican Institute, nearly 60 percent of Jordanians believe the country is headed in the wrong direction, citing the rising cost of daily life as the primary reason. Given public frustration with rising prices, the government's stated commitment to

1 See *Jordan Post-election Public Opinion Survey*, International Republican Institute, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2013%20April%2010%20Survey%20of%20Jordanian%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20March%204-7%2C%202013.pdf>.

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reduce the fiscal deficit by reducing electricity, fuel, and food subsidies can only further inflame public discontent. The recently released budget postpones some of the most painful steps until 2014, but such necessary reforms cannot be delayed indefinitely.

There are common frustrations articulated by many Jordanians, but social divisions among tribal competitors, secularists and Islamists, urban and rural populations, and Palestinian- and East Banker-Jordanians have prevented a coordinated or cohesive opposition movement from emerging, and external factors have dampened much of the early enthusiasm for Arab awakening sentiments, including the instability caused by the Muslim Brotherhood's rise and fall in Egypt, sustained militia violence in Libya, and the brutal civil war in Syria. Yet despite the decrease in political activism, the same dangerous cocktail of political grievances remains. With the kingdom set to experience increased economic and social pressures from rising prices with the removal of electricity subsidies, high unemployment among recent graduates, and increasing numbers of Syrian refugees, there is a strong likelihood that public frustration will again erupt. The question is what form will it take, whether youth will play a catalyzing role, who will participate, and what lasting impact (if any) will it have on the political environment in Jordan?

A key ingredient that drove the protest movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen was the youth population and their inclination to organize and activate thousands of people to protest against the excesses of the ruling regimes. In each of these countries, the vast majority of youth were largely apathetic, uninvolved, and uninitiated—but this changed when they sensed their own power and the potential for political change. In Jordan, the youth are an untapped reserve. If the Arab Spring showed us anything it is that as pressure continues to build, young people in Jordan will eventually take the helm when the moment is right—it could be months, or it could be years.

Across the social strata, older generations are largely invested in the status quo and have too much to lose by rocking the boat, but Jordanian youth could have

a great deal to gain by shifting the balance of power. With those under the age of thirty-five comprising nearly 70 percent of the country's population with a 30 percent unemployment rate, the youth have both the numbers and the impetus to play an import role in pushing for change. Participating in formal politics has been disincentivized by the domination of elders in political parties and a minimum age requirement of thirty to run in parliamentary elections, which limits young peoples' inclination and ability to influence policy.

The perpetuation of the current state of affairs where political power is concentrated among a small elite, nepotism dictates success, and the misuse of state resources causes great frustration for young Jordanians who do not have access to the kind of economic and employment opportunity they need. That said, the Jordanian monarchy does not practice the kind of repression that Mubarak's Egypt or Ben Ali's Tunisia suffered from over decades. Though restricted by their age in important ways, young Jordanians do have the opportunity to engage in various forms of political activism, whether through registered political parties, informal opposition movements, social justice and volunteerism, street protests, or internet-based youth platforms.

Looking forward, there are four avenues for youth to engage more deeply in the political process:

1. Increased unity and activity of Herak movements

With the upsurge in public frustration in early 2011, a series of localized protest groups or Herak (Arabic for "movement") emerged that draw their support predominately from tribal East Bank youth, a community that has historically been the bedrock of support for the monarchy. Now this allegiance has been shaken, in part because they no longer benefit financially to the same degree they once did. As of yet, there is still no unified Herak movement, rather there are a multitude of disparate groupings of young people that coalesce around certain key issues: unemployment, rising prices, corruption, and lack of political accountability. They communicate via Facebook and other social media networks, but have yet to form a

cohesive body that could galvanize the underlying strength in their numbers. These groups organized ad-hoc protests for nearly two years, and though they have lost steam recently, they continue to stage small street protests most Fridays in a number of cities, most prominently in Amman, Irbid, Karak, and Tefileh.

The Herak protests largely focus on combating official corruption, curbing high unemployment, and assuaging other economic pressures. With these groups highly sensitive to increasing prices from subsidy reforms and facing increasing competition for limited jobs and resources from newly arriving Syrian refugees, tensions could reach a boiling point and trigger renewed Herak activity that swells their ranks and prompts greater street protests. Despite this focus, it would be inaccurate to state that Herak members care only about economic issues; according to one Jordanian political analyst, they no longer accept the traditional social contract that their parents adhered to and seek political reform and greater freedoms as well.

Though international attention is focused on what happens in Amman, outside the capital Jordan is boiling under the surface. In fact, on July 12, there were no protests in Amman for the first time in two months, but Jordan's south witnessed a string of demonstrations demanding government reform, an end to corruption, and release of political prisoners. In the midst of the heat and Ramadan fasting, small groups are still rallying and protests in Karak, the center of Herak activity, slammed parliament's performance, called for its dissolution, and demanded genuine reform. In the town of Mazar, protesters demand that Jordan's stolen funds and assets be recovered and called for a national salvation government and a shadow parliament to undertake real change.

Despite this activity and the possibility for youth to play a leadership role in street activism, the Herak groups' weakness is their lack of cohesion and lack of organizational structure on the ground. If, however, increasing economic pressures prompt various local Herak movements to develop a common platform and begin coordinating with each other, it could result in

a powerful opposition force where youth could find greater footing. This would require the Herak groups to put their common political goals ahead of existing tribal differences—a difficult but not insurmountable obstacle.

2. Youth within Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood are activated

The Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), are the largest and best-organized opposition group within Jordan. They recognize the importance of attracting young members and have a robust youth wing that performs extremely well in university elections—an important political arena for youth who are largely marginalized from the official political process. IAF's engagement in the political life of the kingdom has taken on many shades—from participating and winning a significant number of parliamentary seats in the late 1990s to boycotting the most recent polls in January 2013.

In a political environment where political parties tend to be weak, the IAF has significant support; Jordanian analysts have estimated that in an election with proportional representation, the Brotherhood would garner 25 to 30 percent of the vote, though this is not substantiated with data. Like Islamist movements in many places, the Brotherhood has built a strong network in part by providing important services to poor communities, including food, health care, and education. Despite this broad appeal, the movement is limited in its ability to appeal to a broad segment of youth across the country because of its religious orientation and the assumption that it primarily represents the Palestinian-Jordanian community within urban areas. Although their membership is more diverse than might be perceived by some Jordanians, this makes it difficult to build coalitions with secularists, or form alliances with other youth organizations or youth-led initiatives through the various Herak groups that are based largely on their East Bank identity.

There is a widespread perception among opposition forces that the Muslim Brotherhood seeks only to exploit the energy and dynamism of youth activists

and other protest groups at certain moments, but then quickly sells them down the river when it serves their own interests. At the height of the Jordanian street protests in March 2012, an ad-hoc alliance between the IAF, youth protest groups, and leftist political organizations collapsed when the Brotherhood leadership essentially cut a deal with the regime that assured their protection. A movement that brings together these three elements could be a powerful voice advocating for an end to regime corruption and greater political reform; yet the incentives are not there for the Brotherhood to play a galvanizing role.

At the same time, it is important to note that the Muslim Brotherhood is a broad umbrella with various internal factions. Last year, some of the movement's more moderate leaders joined together with other Islamists to launch the independent minded Zamzam Initiative. This is relevant for youth in the IAF because the son of the Zamzam leader, Rhayil Gharaibeh, is head of the Brotherhood's youth wing. The leadership of the initiative has been asserting itself more publicly recently and issued a vision statement on June 20 noting that, "Jordan's 'shallow political partisan life,' threats facing young Jordanians, and the increasing violence across the nation's universities were the major stimuli behind Zamzam's formation." Building upon the Zamzam momentum and its focus on pragmatism and reform could galvanize increased activism among the youth supporters who are unhappy with the direction of the country and could even attract membership from a wider section of Jordanian society. Even though the IAF boycotted the last election, Brotherhood youth could join with other political forces to advocate for lowering the candidacy age for parliament, which would likely benefit the IAF more than any other party given its well-organized political machine.

3. Emergence of new political parties to carry the youth banner

Although the explosion of new parties that occurred in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt has not happened in Jordan, some new parties or political movements have emerged over the past several years, due in part to the demonstration effect across the region and in part to the king's stated desire for a party-based political

system. These new political parties, however, are still in their nascent form and lack the recognizable figures or established political entities around which youth activists could coalesce. A charismatic and well-known leader could prove an attractive option for overcoming the challenges new parties face with organizing grassroots support, but youth activists have expressed frustration at not having any heroes that could garner enough widespread support to be viable leaders for the youth to follow.

Until now, no political leader or party, aside from the IAF, has made a concerted effort to reach out to the youth by empowering them within the party and crafting a message to appeal to them. For example, a compelling message that could potentially transcend the tribal, religious, and ethnic divisions that have divided the youth thus far would be a party platform calling for lowering the age requirement to serve in parliament from thirty to twenty-five, creating youth-targeted job bills, and lowering education costs. The established parties are courting the youth involved in the Herak movements, but only in a relatively superficial way. Given the stagnancy of the parties and their limited relevance in the current political system, there's little incentive for young activists clamoring for political reform to join.

Some new parties, such as Jordanian National Youth Party, the Jordan National Union Party, and the Stronger Party all purport to reach out to youth, but as of yet, little progress has been made. In large part, this is because most Jordanians see little value in political parties since voting decisions are still largely made based on tribal identity rather than party affiliation or platforms, and parties have a small proportion of seats allocated for them in parliament. The Free Assembly party, which submitted its registration request in October 2012, is one of the new entrants on the political scene and has distinguished itself by seeking a number of youth to play active leadership roles. They boast that 70 percent of their members are below the age of forty and that they have representation in Amman, Karak and Irbid. With the under-thirty group making up such a large contingent of the Jordanian population, there is a strong incentive for such efforts, yet this is uncharted territory.

4. Activation of independent youth movements, utilizing social media and online platforms

In addition to the emergence of the Herak groups, there is a growing phenomenon of liberal youth activism that is not driven by religious or tribal identities, and that does not seek engagement with formal political parties. These reformists are calling for a stronger parliament with real authorities, transparency, accountability, and social justice. Many of these youth activists are contributing to the political debate through social media campaigns and other online platforms, since few other avenues seem valuable to them.

An ad-hoc group of young Jordanians, frustrated by the lack of genuine political representation and age-old dominance of elites allied with the king, launched a youth [Facebook Parliament](#) last fall before the January elections. Organizers conducted a mock online election with candidates forming lists, and campaigning virtually for votes. The winners were given seats in the Facebook Parliament with the intent of holding parliamentary sessions and votes in parallel with the real parliament. The intent of the youth parliament was not only to give young people an outlet, but also to use the platform as a watchdog function for the elected parliament, and to offer alternative ideas. A separate online effort, "[We Are the 70%](#)," seeks to galvanize support through an online petition for lowering the minimum age of candidacy for the parliament from thirty to twenty-five years for the Chamber of Deputies and from forty to thirty for the senate. The question will be whether Jordanian youth can take this to the next level by forming coalitions and conducting coordinated advocacy campaigns for tangible policy changes.

Youth activists will face challenges, particularly if online efforts continue to gain attention inside the country, as the government has recognized the importance of the Internet for political opposition. The recently implemented [Press and Publication Law](#), which bans 290 of Jordan's 400 local news websites, targets online blogs and media sites popular with youth activists. Freedom of expression is under threat, and this new law will likely be used to constrain the ability of the youth to mobilize in the future. Playing a role in a

campaign to revise or revoke this law would be a good opportunity for politically-minded youth. Jordanian sociologist Wael al-Khatib [notes](#) that a senior Jordanian government official mentioned the government is considering new methods to block social media sites as well. If so, it would represent the next step in "Jordan's race to become the most autocratic country in the Middle East with regard to free expression... Before taking sure measures, however, [Prime Minister Abdullah] Ensour should ask himself: What is the cost of pushing Jordanian youth, particularly those who are politically active, to go to the street?"

What Comes Next for Jordan's Youth?

The most effective way for youth to advance a reform agenda would be to form a coalition among these various groups. Jordan sits at an unprecedented moment of potential convergence between the two strongest opposition forces—the Muslim Brotherhood and the Herak groups; if they coordinated and leveraged popular support, they could take the regime to task for rampant corruption, a central rallying cry of both groups. Nascent political groups and non-partisan youth movements could also contribute support where interests are aligned.

But although the Herak groups and the Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front have periodically coordinated or joined together in street protests demanding some of the same reforms, there are fundamental and perhaps insurmountable differences over their desired outcomes and their methods. The current political and the electoral system has been designed to sustain the preferential treatment of the East Bank tribes, traditionally the stalwart supporters of the monarchy, and it is unlikely that Herak groups would advocate for the kind of political reform and electoral change that the IAF would seek since it would necessarily increase the political power of non-tribal populations and Palestinian-Jordanians that are concentrated in urban areas.

Beyond these political and ideological differences, there is also an underlying skepticism and lack of trust between the groups. In general, Herak movements fear that the Brotherhood merely wants to co-opt their appeal among youth, and many fundamentally distrust

the Brotherhood because they have played the regime loyalist in the past. When the IAF decided to boycott the parliamentary elections last January on grounds that they would not be free and fair, many Herak groups initially pledged to boycott as well, but then broke ranks with the Brotherhood's boycott. In fact, some Herak supporters saw an opening to get a foot in the door, entered the election as individual candidates or on a list in hopes of increasing their political access within the system.

Looking forward, it is most likely that youth engaged in these movements will continue to assert themselves, but separately and to different degrees. Expected increases in food and electricity prices and the increasing number of Syrian refugees will give a renewed spark to the Herak protest movements. The IAF will continue to broaden its recruitment of youth, further expanding the next generation of leaders and their influence in the party. If the age limit for serving in parliament is lowered to twenty-five as past efforts have attempted to do, established political parties will likely step up efforts to incorporate the youth into their parties. Independent youth groups will continue to develop their political experience and leadership skills through their community outreach and youth parliament efforts.

Despite competing agendas and a degree of distrust, there are some unifying themes across protest and reform-oriented movements that could be galvanized: ongoing corruption and nepotism, abuse of state resources by the palace, crackdowns on freedom of speech, and lack of economic opportunity coupled with rising cost of living. When the shared commonalities of these grievances supersede the desire to advance narrow parochial interests, then youth could bridge these divides and coalesce into the critical mass needed to become a force for real political change.

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