

Domino Jordan?

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in the context of the Tunisian „Jasmine Revolution“ and the Egyptian „March of Millions“

Long before the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia started, Jordan already witnessed social protests. At the same time, the historic events in Tunisia rubbed off on the more stable and peaceful kingdom of Jordan: almost the whole society sympathizes with the Tunisian nation and in many places people express their wish that Mubarak's regime should be the next one overthrown by the people. Nevertheless, the protests in Jordan have been much more limited and have not reached a level that could threaten the stability of the Jordanian regime.

Thus far, the regime in Jordan managed to deal with the protests, which have been mainly directed against rising commodity prices for food and petrol, by traditional means: As in former "bread riots", the government softened economic liberalization policies, i.e. took back part of cuts in subsidies and announced raising the salaries of government staff. Moreover, on February 1st, King Abdullah II reacted once again in a traditional manner by replacing the government.

Contrary to Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, King Abdullah II succeeded in directing the protests and criticism to the government away from himself. If criticism is leveled at the King, it is mostly quietly pronounced and manifests itself as transfigured memory of the skilful and popular art of statesmanship of the late King Hussein.

The accelerating political developments in Tunisia since December culminated in the temporary overthrow of the decades-long dictatorship of Ben Ali. He then went into exile in Saudi Arabia where on January 27, 2011, the legal authorities of the transitional government issued an international arrest warrant against him.¹ A "March of the Millions" took place in Cairo on February 1, 2011, in which the public

openly demanded the withdrawal from power of President Mubarak.² The modern Arab history is rich in political overthrows indeed. Yet, all previous events of this kind were directed against colonial regimes and/or took the form of "Revolutions from Above", i.e. regime changes conducted by parts of the political elites who, from the very beginning, directed political developments into authoritarian passages.³ The recent political development, however, came from "below". This does not by any means guarantee that true democratization processes in the Arab world will occur. Yet, there is a chance. In the following analysis we will discuss the consequences for Jordan and raise the question what conclusions Western foreign policy makers ought to draw towards the Hashemite Kingdom.

Current Developments in Jordan

Even before it was clear that the Tunisian *ancien régime* would be overthrown, there were protests in Amman and other Jordanian cities in January in which citizens demonstrated against corruption, rising food and fuel prices, tax and economic policies of the government and unemployment.⁴ With the increasing reac-

¹ "Tunisia: Arrest warrant issued for ex-president Ben Ali", BBC, January 26, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12286650> [31.01.2011].

² „Egypt protesters increase pressure“, Al Jazeera, January 31, 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/01/20111316148317175.html> [31.01.2011]; "March of Millions" Feb 1, 2011, Tahrir Square, Cairo", CNN iReport, February 1, 2011, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-548410> [01.02.2011].

³ Beck, Martin (2007): "Paving the Way for Democracies or Strengthening Authoritarianism? Reforms in the Middle East", in: Fürtig, Henner (ed.): The Arab Authoritarian Regime Between Reform and Persistence, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 1-24.

⁴ „Jordanians march against inflation“, Al Jazeera, January 14, 2010,

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tion among the Jordanian population to the developments in Tunisia, more and more members of the Jordanian opposition sympathized with the Tunisian demonstrators and criticized openly the Jordanian government.⁵ On January 21st, around 4,000 to 5,000 people from Amman gathered after Friday prayers to demand economic reforms and the resignation of Prime Minister Samir Rifa'i.⁶ 1,400 other demonstrators are said to have gathered in the cities of Zarqa and Irbid. The government had already claimed on January 11th and 20th that it was going to take measures to improve living conditions and announced a 283 Mio US-Dollar program for raising salaries of government staff as well as pensions of retired government employees. However, Maisarah Malas, a prominent unionist, criticized the measures taken by the government and labeled them as an attempt to "drug people". Furthermore, he asked for comprehensive reforms to improve the current situation.⁷ Yet, according to the government-loyal newspaper Jordan Times, the socialist leftist movement welcomed the measures of January 11, 2011, and confined itself to call the government to do more.⁸

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/01/20111141219337111.html> [31.01.2011].

⁵ „Jordan protesters inspired by Tunisian ripple“, CNN, January 19, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-19/world/jordan.ripple_1_tunisian-president-jordanians-jordan-protesters?_s=PM:WORLD [31.01.2011].

⁶ „Jordan protests: Thousands rally over economic policies“, BBC, January 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12257894> [31.01.2011].

⁷ „Thousands of Jordanians protest government policies in various cities, after Friday prayers“, Al Jazeera, January 21, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/News/2011/January/22%20On/Thousands%20of%20Jordanians%20Protest%20Government%20Policies%20in%20Various%20Cities,%20After%20Friday%20Prayers,%20January%2021,%202011.htm> [31.01.2011].

⁸ „New government measures welcome, more is needed“, Jordan Times, January 13, 2011, <http://jordantimes.com/index.php?news=33442> [31.01.2011].

Similarities with Tunisia and Egypt

Jordan's unemployment rate is on the rise. Official statistics specify it around 14%; unofficial figures estimate it as high as 30%.⁹ Like in Tunisia, Egypt and the Arab world in general, with its high birth rate, the problem of unemployment mainly affects the young generation: 70% of the 6 million inhabitants in Jordan are younger than 30 and also the better qualified face the danger of unemployment or being underpaid.¹⁰ Most tension exist in urban areas and in the capital Amman – one of the most expensive cities of the Middle East where the daily struggle for survival is a real challenge for those with an average income.¹¹ Structural similarities with Tunisia and Egypt are also observable insofar as the politicization of social issues is manifested through the widespread accusation of bad governance and corruption fostered from above. Vast parts of the population feel strong sentiments of frustration about central institutions of the political system, particularly the government and the parliament, which are frequently manifested in more or less well proven accusations and rumors of corruption affairs.

Like in Egypt, the protests in Jordan are not led by established opposition forces – in both countries the Muslim Brotherhood and their offsprings, respectively.¹² Nev-

⁹ Hazaimah, Hani (2010): „Unemployment rises in third quarter“, Jordan Times, September 30, 2010, <http://www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=30512>, http://www.indexmundi.com/jordan/unemployment_rate.html [31.01.2011].

¹⁰ „Testimonies Jordan“, Euro Mediterranean Youth Platform, <http://www.euromedp.org/testimonies/jordan/> [31.01.2011].

¹¹ „Thousands of Jordanians protest government policies in various cities, after Friday prayers“, Al Jazeera, January 21, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/News/2011/January/22%20On/Thousands%20of%20Jordanians%20Protest%20Government%20Policies%20in%20Various%20Cities,%20After%20Friday%20Prayers,%20January%2021,%202011.htm> [31.01.2011].

¹² „Egypt's opposition pushes demands as protests continue“, BBC, February 1, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12290167>, „Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood Organizes More Anti-Government Protests“, The Global Muslim

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ertheless, this should not be interpreted as an indicator that they have given up their fights against the regimes in Jordan and Egypt. Rather, they seem to pursue a strategy of "wait and see" for further developments of the social upheavals, thereby relying on their superior organizational capacities. There appears to be a tactic understanding that the revolts should not be perceived (too early) as Islamist upheavals, thereby preventing the government from oppressing their organization. At the same time, the Jordanian opposition leader of the Islamic Action Front, Hamza Mansour, called for comprehensive political reforms: the King should only be the guide and "not the executor of the country's daily affairs" and the Prime Minister and the cabinet should be democratically elected.¹³

Domino Effect?

The protests in Jordan have been triggered by structural problems that are partially similar to those in Tunisia and Egypt. Moreover, the solidarity of the Jordanians with their Arab "brothers and sisters" is very strong. Nonetheless, in Jordan there are no indicators for an immediate regime change: the extent of the social protests is much less pronounced and they are directed only against the government, whereas the King as the ruler of Jordan and the highest representative of its authoritarian regime is not targeted.¹⁴ In contrast to the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, which shifted their legitimacy basis in former modernization and transformation processes away from traditional social groups to the modern

middle and upper classes, the Hashemite Kingdom receives strong social support from the rural population which is organized on the basis of tribal and kinship structures. This Trans-Jordanian part of Jordan is absolutely loyal towards the King, as it is highly privileged through the election law and, above all, its strong over-representation in the security apparatus. Thus, in the case of Jordan it is not foreseeable that the security forces and the army would contribute to the destabilization of the regime.¹⁵

Furthermore, the differences between the political systems should not be underestimated. While Mubarak and Ben Ali have created extremely repressive regimes, the Jordanian authoritarian system is characterized by its high flexibility with which it deals with the opposition. This may be illustrated by comparing the past elections in Jordan on November 9 and in Egypt on November 28: Both polls were manipulated by the regime but while such a policy was conducted openly and brutally in Egypt, the Jordanian leadership retained the upper hand through a policy of limited concessions. After the King had dissolved the parliament in November 2009, the government seized the opportunity of setting the political agenda by initiating an intense debate on the new election law. Although the finally released new election law did not introduce basic changes, some minor concessions were amended. Eventually, regardless of the boycott of the Islamic Action Front as the major opposition party, the regime could hold the polls without massive interventions. The government could even afford to allow a rudimentary form of monitoring the elections.¹⁶

Brotherhood Daily Report, January 28, 2011, <http://globalmbreport.org/?p=3766> [01.02.2011].

¹³ „Jordan protests: Thousands rally over economic policies“, BBC, January 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12257894>, „Jordan protesters inspired by Tunisian ripple“, CNN, January 19, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-19/world/jordan.ripple_1_tunisian-president-jordanians-jordan-protesters?_s=PM:WORLD [31.01.2011].

¹⁴ „Jordan protests: Thousands rally over economic policies“, BBC, January 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12257894>, „Jordan protesters inspired by Tunisian ripple“, CNN, January 19, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-19/world/jordan.ripple_1_tunisian-president-jordanians-jordan-protesters?_s=PM:WORLD [31.01.2011].

¹⁵ Since the Trans-Jordanian population is politically but not in general socially privileged, there is some potential for social protest among them, too. Accordingly, some unrest erupted in the last month which took the form of clan fights whose political character, however, often remained unclear.

¹⁶ Beck, Martin and Collet, Léa (2010): „Jordan's 2010 Election Law: Democratization or Stagnation?“, KAS Amman Country Report November 2010, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_20947-1522-2-30.pdf?101108101423 [31.01.2011].

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In light of the continuing pressure on the government of Samir Rifa'i, the King dismissed it on February 1st and re-appointed former Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit. According to a statement of the Royal Court, the new government will be tasked with realizing "genuine political and economic reforms" to promote the modernization of Jordan and to enhance the active participation of all Jordanians in the political decision-making process.¹⁷ This reaction of King Abdullah to the protests in Jordan shows, on the one hand, that he perceives them as a serious political problem. On the other hand, he appears to be confident in being able to manage the protests by rather traditional means of dismissing an unpopular government.

The appointment of al-Bakhit was immediately criticized, particularly by the Islamist opposition. General al-Bakhit's reputation is, on the one hand, to be an experienced politician, on the other, the former Jordanian Ambassador to Israel has the tarnished reputation of having solved the security problems which became apparent by the violent hotel bombings in Amman in 2005 with harsh authoritarian means during his first term as head of the government.¹⁸ Moreover, his government heavily manipulated the elections of 2007. Therefore, the fear is widespread that the former national security chief might not be the best choice for pursuing an agenda of political reforms.

How should the German and the EU Foreign Policy React?

The stability of the Jordanian Kingdom is not directly threatened. The basic prob-

¹⁷ "King of Jordan fires government"; The Washington Times, February 1, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/feb/1/king-of-jordan-fires-government/> [01.02.2011].

¹⁸ „Jordan Protests: King Abdullah names Marouf Bakhit PM“, BBC, February 1, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12336960> [01.02.2011].

lems, which have led to overthrowing and putting into question the Tunisian and Egyptian political systems, respectively, are, however, also manifested in the case of Jordan, i.e. a rapidly growing young population whose aspiration is blocked due to social, economic and political constraints. Moreover, the regime of King Abdullah II shares with those of Ben Ali and Mubarak the feature of authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the regime in Jordan has made less use of repression and has been more flexible in dealing with the opposition. Like any authoritarian regime, the Jordanian system suffers from a lack of legitimacy but it enjoys comparatively high potentials in handling issues even when facing serious challenges. Since the regime is dependent on foreign financial aid from the Gulf region and the West and is thoroughly versed in acquiring them, it is very likely that Jordan will use the current political turbulences in the Middle East by pinpointing to its stabilizing role in the Middle East in order to request higher external aid. Western foreign policy should use this occasion in order to sharpen its policy of conditionality: The allocation of aid to Jordan should be linked to the promotion of structural reforms.

In view of the experiences since King Abdullah's accession to power, the focus should be on demanding political reforms since his approach has been for years to combine policies of economic liberalization with a strategy of political deliberalization.¹⁹ Thereby, the West should take advantage of the fact that in light of the developments in Tunisia and Egypt, the Jordanian government is probably sensitized for an agenda of political reforms. At the same time, the regime might very well still be inclined to focus on economic reforms in order to preserve

¹⁹ Beck, Martin (with assistance from Jennifer Schuster) (2010): „Jordanien auf Abwegen?“, KAS Amman Country Report January 2010, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_18729-1522-1-30.pdf?100201105855 [31.01.2011].

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its political privileges. Germany and Europe should oppose such a strategy and clarify that economic modernization must be accompanied by political change. In particular, the government ought to democratize the election law and promote the rule of law. To achieve these aims, cooperation with the civil society should be given priority and strengthened.