

Modernization Beyond Politics: Embracing Social Diversity in Jordan

Wael Al-Khatib

Introduction

Jordan has been always seen as a country of low tensions between different religious, cultural, and ethnic groups. This is due to different factors, including that the state is not structured based on sectarian divisions – the majority of the population is Sunni Muslims – and that the regime embraces a moderate discourse in favour of diversity and dialogue. For instance, the Amman message in 2005 was a document of religious dialogue among different religious groups and to confront radicalism and terrorism, tolerance, and unity in the Muslim world. Also, the Royal Institute for Faith Studies is another state institution that is well known in the Muslim world as a place of cultural exchange, interfaith discussions and Muslim-Muslim research and dialogue. But still, society and the state are being affected by regional, international and domestic social changes and development due to the various “civil wars” in the region, economic hardships in addition to the psychological pressure caused by the COVID- 19 crisis.

In the following, I will discuss the importance and the urgent need to have a national dialogue on embracing diversity in Jordan that goes in parallel with the current political effort, embodied by the deliberations and recommendations of the Royal Committee, to reform the political system. Without this part of collective discussion at the national level, Jordan will remain in the same closed circle of discussing “political modernization” theoretically without tangible achievements.

“We should enhance the culture of embracing diversity beyond the modernization of politics”

What is really needed is not only modifying policies and laws. Rather, we should enhance the culture of embracing diversity beyond the modernization of politics by the top- down and bottom-up approach. This approach is needed in order to build new societal interactions of political acceptance and to create an arena of healthy political diversity that shows positive impacts of political engagements and developments specifically among youth and women.

The Challenge of Accepting Diversity: Recent Examples

Jordanian digital media platforms were heavily engaged with several main controversial events over the summer of 2021. The first one concerned a member of the Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System, which was formed by a royal decree and is led by a former Prime Minister Samir Rifaei. Oraib Rantawi, who is heading the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies and plays a prominent role as a writer, stepped down from the Royal Committee. Public digital platforms users accused him of denying the role of the Jordanian Army in the Karameh Battle of 1968 citing a paragraph in his article related to decision of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) decision to join the battle. Also, more than 9,000 military retirees had signed a letter demanding his resignation from the Royal Committee because of his newspaper article.

This above example can serve as a reflection on the discourse of national identity in Jordan and how identity has been used and divided into more spatial and geo-political loyalty. For instance, the Military retiree confrontation with Rantawi leads us to the historical discussion of East/West Bank interactions, socially and politically, and how they played out in creating a national identity for the newly founded state. However, these relations and dynamics

rather shaped the way of seeing Jordan from outside perspectives. Instead, the making of national identity of the kingdom is more about social traditions, national rituals such as popular music, national dishes, and social narrations by not only East/West bankers but also, other minorities and ethnicities. To overcome the potential of manipulation of sub-national identity cleavages, Jordan needs to build on its own social dialogues of shaping, reproducing, and reintroducing a more collective national identity especially with the celebration of 100 years since the founding of Jordan.

The second event, was when Wafa Khadra who is also a member of the royal committee resigned after digital public anger against her tweet criticizing Eid Al-Adha sacrifice traditions and rituals. The incident shows us the cultural sensitivity concerning any ideas understanding religious practices in a different than the usual established way. Regardless of our opinion on specific matters and their opinions, the harsh campaigns against the two members of the Royal Committee show the lack of acceptance of diversity and thus the urgent need to strengthen the value of tolerance within society.

Another example of the weak culture of diversity acceptance is the debate around the Netflix Jordanian series "Rawabi School for Girls", which is a mini-series discussing female teenagers matters with a main focus on honor

crimes, sexual harassment, and patriarchal power. After the series was released on Netflix, a large part of the public opinion on social media platforms have adopted the idea that this series does not represent Jordanian society or Jordanian culture and traditions. They have also criticized 'Ammani' urban life and dialects claiming that "Amman is not Jordan". While it is fair to say that the series is featuring the more affluent members of Jordanian society, Amman's inhabitants of course are Jordanian as well, with their own diversified identities. By looking at this example and other public opinion cases, we notice a dissociative behavior of the Jordanian society in which they are scared of any event that might reveal the very internal facts of a very conservative society.

Social Diversity and Democratization

These mentioned above developments are clear indications of the rather low societal level of accepting different opinions regardless of its cultural "sensitivity". We see new models of social criminalization and labelling of any different ideas or thoughts not only in religious, ideological, and ritual related topics but also at the political level. This leads to a major question among political experts and democracy advocates on the status of democratization in Jordan. Some argue that Jordan is not

ready for a transparent, complete democratic processes, and real openness. This would be due to social, tribal, and cultural challenges and the limits of open discussions through the different digital media platforms. This argument was prevalent among anti-democratic groups after the Arab Spring in 2011. However, these anti-democratic groups forget that Jordan has had a progressive political life with active political parties' whose dynamics in the 1950s led to the first parliamentary government in 1956.

Today, with a new generation of Youth that is open to changes and that is globally and regionally connected through easily accessible digital communication tools and social media, Jordan has the perfect opportunity to have a real political transition – if it is engrained in a renewed culture of acceptance of diversity that has long roots in Jordanian traditions and should also be part of our collective identity in the future.

What Should Be Done?

"Development is based on collective efforts of the whole society and it is not limited to the efforts of the state or localities"

International cooperation agencies all around the world have been providing aid to Jordan for a very long period of time in order to sustain a balanced level of development in many areas. Working on

the acceptance of others who are different was and still is a major priority to the donor agencies and international organizations. They should keep up their efforts, while acknowledging the social realities in Jordan and working closely with local partners.

However, even more important is the political will of Jordan's authorities to undertake active steps towards social and political "modernization" such as activating the rule of law, promoting freedom of speech, countering cyberbullying and hate speech, supporting cultural activities and encouraging people to read and to attend cultural public

events such as concerts, theater activities, arts and reading clubs.

Finally, development is based on collective efforts of the whole society and it is not limited to the efforts of the state or localities. Social change depends foremost on intellectuals and elites such as university professors, journalists, artists, politicians and political activists, social media "influencers" and Civil Society advocates. They all are encouraged to contribute to a more diverse discourse and a renewed culture of the acceptance of diversity in our society. In the long run, this will help in ensuring the social and political stability Jordan can be proud of.

Wael Al-Khatib has an MA in Social Anthropology and is currently working on a PhD in the same field. In his research he is interested in understanding street politics, youth and social movements, and state-society relations in Jordan. He has also worked as international development executive in the last 13 years in the MENA region, with a focus on youth, women, vulnerable groups, and socio-economic and political participation.

Jordan. The next chapter – أفكار أردنية

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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.
Jordan Office
23, Isma'eel Haqqi Abdoh Street, Sweifieh
11183 Amman, Jordan
info.jordan@kas.de

Resident Representative:
Dr. Edmund Ratka