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Jordan and Morocco:
The Palace Gambit

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Abstract

Ruling monarchies in Morocco and Jordan outlasted the Arab Spring through familiar tactics such as halfhearted reforms, as well as upgraded strategies of management. No longer intent on avoiding elections, now these regimes welcome them in order to expose opposition as too incompetent to govern even when given the opportunity. They no longer deny royalist absolutism to the public, but rather embrace it as the ideal guarantor of normalcy and stability. Adapting back, however, is a new generation of youth activists who elude their regimes' grasp and radically challenge the legitimacy of monarchical governance. The potential for revolution still exists.

There are ten ruling monarchies left in the world. In these nondemocratic regimes, a hereditary sovereign directs decision making by forming and dismissing governments and controlling levers of repression. The broader Middle East is home to eight of these monarchies: Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Of these, Morocco and Jordan have much more in common with each other than either does with the remaining six. The other kingdoms all cluster around the Persian Gulf, and their historical development has been shaped by oil rents. Morocco is far away on the northwest shoulder of Africa, equidistant between New York and Riyadh. Jordan, an artificial state birthed by British imperialism during the first half of the twentieth century, is located in the heart of the Levant.

Neither Morocco nor Jordan has hydrocarbon wealth. Each maintains a liberalized political system, with an elected though toothless parliament, an active civil society, and less repression than is found in the Gulf region. For these and other reasons, many assessments (including some that have appeared in these pages) have portrayed Morocco and Jordan as the Middle Eastern monarchies that are most likely to democratize, however gradually.[1]

The Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies' penchant for limited pluralism has been on display since the bursting forth of the Arab Spring in early 2011, when both regimes faced the threat of popular revolution. Mass protests demanding democracy, transparency, and dignity so perturbed palace observers that both King Mohammed VI of Morocco (b. 1963) and King Abdullah II of Jordan (b. 1962) pledged to democratize via constitutional amendments and freer parliamentary elections. As 2011 came to close and mass demonstrations petered out, prominent **[End Page 132]** writers acclaimed each regime as a "model" of democratic progress whose reformist example, had it been followed, might have prevented the bloodbaths in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.[2] The good press for Morocco and Jordan continued during the last quarter of 2016, as the two kingdoms held near-simultaneous parliamentary elections that international monitors said were largely clean and fair.

Although no serious scholar will confuse Morocco or Jordan with a democracy, in some academic and journalistic quarters the view has taken hold that these monarchies are gradually and peacefully evolving toward democratic status. In truth, they look good only because the rest of the region (democratic Tunisia aside) looks so bad. They appear as promising reformers when compared to the Gulf monarchies—which include some the world's most closed and coercive dictatorships—and as islands of stability when viewed alongside the collapsing, war-ravaged republics of Libya, Syria, and Yemen. When plucked from this context and analyzed on their own terms, however, the regime trajectories of Morocco's Alaouite Dynasty and Jordan's Hashemite House do not look nearly so promising.

The old lesson that movement is not transition applies here. The specter of chaos raised by mass protests roused the Jordanian and Moroccan monarchies to act. Their

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first response was to play the short game by taking up that handy tool of embattled autocrats who feel too weak to unleash full-fledged repression: half-hearted liberalizing reforms. Yet the regimes played a more innovative long game as well. Their objective was to show that ruling monarchism, far from being an outmoded style of governance, was actually *indispensable* for order and stability because opposition forces could not be trusted. In both countries, the 2016 elections were managed with this goal in mind. The point was to showcase how democratic competition would produce not competent leaders, but rather legislative bodies and political parties so weak and hapless that voters could not possibly imagine letting them wield executive power. In the eyes of royal officials, this was about not merely having the crown survive, but having it thrive: If political normalcy hinges on having a powerful king, then ruling monarchism is not an anachronism to be apologized for, but a boon to be celebrated and secured.

Movement without transition does not imply the impossibility of change. Regime change can still occur in Morocco and Jordan. But if and when it happens, it will be a matter of revolutionary explosions from below, not incremental transitions guided from above. Large youth populations and widespread economic deprivation make for a volatile mix, as the Arab Spring showed. If popular uprisings recur and cannot be contained, democracy may not be the outcome given how hostile young people have become to formal politics. Many youth activists today shun civil society, elections, and other legal venues on the grounds that they **[End Page 133]** are simply handles for authoritarian manipulation. Youth politics goes on instead via informal networks that operate underground and traffic in radical ideas about jailing the political class for corruption; providing millions of unemployed with jobs; and above all replacing the monarchy, but not necessarily with Western-style democracy.

Although both Morocco and Jordan are staunch allies of the West and receive its financial and military support, Jordan lives in a much tougher geopolitical neighborhood. Morocco (population 34 million) faces no external threat apart from a simmering rivalry with Algeria whose sorest point is the disputed status of the Western Sahara. By contrast, smaller Jordan (population 9.6 million) has long been buffeted by violent conflicts raging on or near its borders. The economic dislocations and refugee influxes that these have brought continue with the Syrian civil war today. Jordan must also manage a deep internal cleavage between Palestinians and Jordanians, which has historically generated far worse strife than anything Morocco has experienced owing to friction between Berbers and Arabs.

Moreover, unlike Gulf royals, both the Alaouites and the Hashemites claim a family relationship to Muhammad, revered by Muslims as the last and greatest of the prophets. The Alaouite kings even bear the sacred title of Emir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), which could make delinking the four-centuries-old Moroccan kingship from executive power trickier than would be the case in Jordan, whose ruling house was installed by the British in 1920. Today's two kings differ from each other as well. Abdullah II of Jordan favors a hands-on leadership style that sees him frequently visiting ministries, conferring with officials, and reviewing major policies before they go into force. Mohammed VI of Morocco, by contrast, has grown largely uninterested in the day-to-day doings of the state over the past decade, preferring to let his inner circle deal with bureaucrats and monitor key projects.

Such contrasts suggest that the Moroccan monarchy may end up taking one path while its Jordanian counterpart follows another, but their commonalities today are striking. Each, seeing in the Arab Spring the sharpest threat that it had faced in decades, chose much the same array of tactical and strategic responses. At the same time, each must wrestle with the problem of a large and restive youth population that is neither integrated politically nor open to the usual means of cooptation. At the end of the path they currently share, in other words, may lie the same explosion. Any study of these regimes must reckon with this.

Structure and Agency

Morocco and Jordan are instances of a once common but now rare brand of authoritarianism. Ruling monarchism disqualifies from power all but a tiny circle of biologically related kin. It is governance by **[End Page 134]** genetics. From the 1950s through the 1970s, the Middle East's ruling monarchies were best known for collapsing (Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen all once had kings). Yet during the Arab Spring the remaining monarchies proved durable, while the rulers of authoritarian republics in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria fell or faced civil war.[3] This has intrigued scholars. Given the general frailty of royal absolutism in modern times, how did monarchies outlast republics during the Arab Spring?

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Most studies, however, focus on what ruling monarchies *are* instead of asking what they *do*. Alfred Stepan and his coauthors, for instance, have hypothesized in these pages that three variables—popular pressure, taxation structure, and ruling-family size—point in a promising direction and may suggest a path to democratization in Morocco and Jordan.[4] Demands for mass participation are real, and nothing new. Two decades ago, the fathers of today's rulers undertook limited political liberalization and relaxed the reins of repression. Lacking oil rents, both monarchies also must rely on taxation. World Bank data show that in both Morocco and Jordan, the state collects about 22 percent of GDP in taxes—the same range as in democratic Lithuania and Chile. There is thus some degree of fiscal accountability to society. The Alaouites and Hashemites also constitute small royal families, with less likelihood of dynastic infighting. In each country, the palace looks for crucial support from loyal elites. In Jordan, the key groups are businesspeople, tribal leaders, and those who staff the state's coercive apparatus. In larger Morocco, the royal coterie (or *makhzen*) is more sprawling, and includes rural landowners, economic magnates, senior bureaucrats, and other elite intermediaries alongside the usual senior military and security officials.

With the possible exception of Kuwait, no other Arab monarchies so closely resemble the autocratic European kingdoms (such as Sweden and Denmark) that peacefully became democratic constitutional monarchies in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. But these circumstances only add up to "possibly could," not "surely will": They are permissive, not determinative preconditions. They say little about how these regimes are behaving now, as they adapt in real time to existential crises. Whatever favorable auguries for democratic change we might read from their structure, these ruling monarchies came out of the Arab Spring armed with new policies of management geared toward their long-term success. They were spurred to innovate, ironically, by their own awareness of history, and in particular by the frequent comparisons that cast their countries as likely sites of democratization (or in other words, as places where ruling monarchism would lose).

The kings of Morocco and Jordan hear counsel on a daily basis from trusted insiders —personal confidants, security chiefs, paid consultants, and sometimes relatives—who have as much incentive as the monarchs do to preserve the status quo.[5] These inner circles view the Arab Spring **[End Page 135]** with profound disquiet. They know that royal dynasties, once deposed, never return to power—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have been through the deepest turmoil, but no one has invited old ruling families back to power. The Arab Spring also underscored how the practice of hereditary succession, so crucial to ruling monarchism, had become indefensible outside the narrow club of royalism. Revolutions roiled all four republics—Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen— where father-son succession had occurred or was expected.

Survival versus Upgrading

The Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies' chief strategic innovation or "upgrading" has been to stop denying or soft-pedaling the historical uniqueness of royal absolutism, and instead to tout it as a strength and advantage.[6] This has meant finding ways to show the world—and the people at home—that royal hegemony is the only alternative to decay, instability, and even chaos. "If you do not want another Libya or Syria," the kings in effect have begun saying, "then support us. Let our palaces safeguard stability with special tutelary authority and a monopoly of executive power." The older survival strategy of half-hearted reform and partial liberalization remains in use as well, but whereas it seeks to placate angry citizens by promising that things will change, the newer appeal asserts that certain things in politics need to stay the same.

The older strategy was in evidence by mid-2011, as both monarchies promulgated constitutional amendments, replete with liberal verbiage, that were framed as entrées to democratization. In practice, and to the surprise of few, these amendments only nibbled at the edges of royal power. Some shifts were noteworthy. In Morocco, the king was required to choose as premier a legislator from the largest party or coalition in parliament. And Jordan got a new constitutional court and an independent election commission. But the monarchies' ironclad control over coercive agencies (including the shadowy *mukhabarat*, or intelligence services) was left untouched, as were absolute royal immunity from legislative oversight and the palaces' ability to control vast undeclared private wealth.

Despite their vapidity, these amendments held enough promise to help take the edge off popular frustration during a frenetic and uncertain time. When Mohammed VI and Abdullah II personally presented the changes to their agitated publics, dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt had already tumbled; Libya, Syria, and Yemen were descending into

violence; and the Bahraini monarchy had just stopped a revolution with armed force backed by Saudi troops. Along with new development spending, aid from the West and the Gulf, and highly selective repression, the constitutional changes helped the palaces to weather the storm.

The subsiding of unrest in 2012 did not end the problem. The palaces **[End Page 136]** and their advisors knew that the protesters, especially the younger ones, might have become fatigued, but remained unsatisfied. And democratic voices close to the thrones, including Prince Moulay Hicham of Morocco and former Jordanian deputy prime minister Marwan Muasher, were warning that short-term survival strategies hinging on false reforms would not suffice.[7] Buying time for authoritarianism, they argued, was not the same as addressing the deep popular frustration with economic deprivation and political exclusion that had prompted the crisis in the first place.

In this milieu, palace strategists saw a way to remake participation and elections into self-defeating mechanisms of democracy. Since the 1990s, regular elections for toothless legislatures had become hallmarks of Moroccan and Jordanian politics. Even if parliament lacked power, opposition parties could hold seats in it, and civil society was allowed a certain freedom as well. This may not sound like much, but it was a significant change for countries that under the current monarchs' fathers had resembled Saudi Arabia and Syria when it came to limiting speech and curbing opposition.

While gradually shrinking the boundaries of associational and media freedoms throughout the 2000s, these regimes kept holding elections, and they tolerated an admirable degree of diversity in their respective civic landscapes. Islamists, liberals, and others could be tenaciously critical, and their complaints could be heard in parliament. The young kings understood that they dared not court the public backlash that any effort to reimpose strict closure would provoke. Then too, the embrace of popular participation and female representation played well with Western donors. Finally, elections had auxiliary value as a channel through which business and tribal clientele networks could be nurtured while aspiring elites competed for royal favor.[8]

In Morocco and Jordan alike, election rules were heavily manipulated to weaken the opposition. In Jordan, the obscure balloting system known as single nontransferable voting (SNTV) discouraged the development of independent parties and facilitated the dominance of tribal-affiliated independents who could be relied on to back the government. Gerrymandered districts also ensured the underrepresentation of urban, Palestinian-dominated cities such as Amman in favor of far more conservative rural areas. Moreover, *mukhabarat* involvement was frequent. Jordanian Islamists were so incensed by perceived security-service penetration of the 2007 election that they boycotted the next several. Morocco, **[End Page 137]** by contrast, retained multipartism thanks to a stronger tradition of party politics and proportional representation (PR). Yet low district magnitudes and other rules worked to fragment the party landscape, and royal meddling was chronic. In 2008, King Mohammed's close friend and advisor Fouad El-Himma founded the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM). Backing the regime, PAM used its hefty resources to bully and overtake most smaller parties.[9]

Old Tools, New Thinking

Since the Arab Spring, the kings of Morocco and Jordan have welcomed electoral contestation. They *want* opposition forces to catapult into prominence via elections that are free of systematic fraud and defensible as democratic. But the elections are a trap: Rules and institutions are stacked to make oppositionists flounder and look bad. The idea is to expose them as such huge failures that the public will inevitably look to the throne as the sole force capable of handling power responsibly and effectively.

Morocco and Jordan have held two general elections each since the Arab Spring. After every balloting, a small army of local and Western monitors certified the contest as relatively competitive and free of systematic irregularities. In Morocco's November 2011 election, the well-organized Justice and Development Party (PJD)—a group that describes itself as having "an Islamic frame of reference" and is generally considered Islamist—won a 107-seat plurality in the 395-member lower house of Parliament. Following the law, King Mohammed asked PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane to become premier, and some Moroccans wondered if an Islamist revolution had just taken place.[10] They need not have worried. The palace directed Benkirane's government to enact long-delayed financial austerity and other widely detested measures, with hostile protests from labor unions, teachers, and women's groups following swiftly. With minders from the palace always on hand to point out who the real Commander of the Faithful was, little headway was made toward implementing Islamist ideology. Critics demanded that

inquiries be made into police torture, clampdowns on civic groups, and the targeting of dissidents, but Benkirane's government had little to say—on security matters, it was kept in the dark.

In the October 2016 elections, the PJD's loyal Islamist base preserved its plurality at 125 seats, but the regime-created and hence better-resourced PAM went from 47 to 102 seats. The palace needs the PJD to remain visible as the face of the opposition so that its ineffectiveness can be highlighted by Morocco's large state-influenced media. In August 2016, well-timed revelations about a PJD-related sex scandal and other improprieties tarnished the group's Islamist credentials. After the elections, Benkirane was reappointed to the premiership, but PAM hostility **[End Page 138]** left him twisting in the wind for months, without a coalition large enough to form a government.

Conventional analyses portray the PJD as a strategic actor playing multiple games. It fends off royal hostility with one hand while implementing its policy goals with the other and watching its bargaining power grow by means of strong electoral showings.[11] Things look different from the palace, however. The regime's huge investment in the PAM means that the throne need waste no resources coopting the PJD the way older leftist and nationalist parties were once bought off. Indeed, the regime is best served if the PJD remains active so that the authoritarian ecology of legal constrictions and political traps in which it is forced to operate can slowly consume it.

If the past year is any indication, the consumption may not even be all that slow. Shortly after the October elections, a fisherman trying to retrieve his police-confiscated catch from a garbage truck died in the city of Hoceima. In the angry demonstrations that followed, many protesters targeted Benkirane. Some blamed his austerity measures for the tragedy; others criticized the PJD for not joining the solidarity marches held on the victim's behalf.[12] Here is the trap facing the PJD: Tasked with implementing unpopular measures such as subsidy cuts, it can either govern effectively and alienate the public, or commit political suicide by resigning.[13] Either way, the PAM and the monarchy stand ready to pick up the pieces. True, a PAM-led government would also shoulder the blame for such unpopular policies, but there is a key difference. As a creature of royal power, when necessary the PAM can simply dissolve; its professional political operators will simply devise new parties replete with new names, symbols, and ideologies—creating the illusion of change, but without a real opposition raising real challenges.

In Jordan, the monarchy's approach has been similar, though it has been aimed more at Parliament in general than at an Islamist party. Well before the January 2013 elections, which like Morocco's 2011 races were framed as a kind of democratic reset, the palace had reached out to the Muslim Brotherhood to implore its participation.[14] This was a shocking gesture given that past royal irritation with Islamist opposition had led to the rigged 2007 elections and consequent Islamist boycott. Although the Brotherhood rebuffed these entreaties, the 2013 contest did advance a long-awaited change: Voters could now cast a second ballot outside the SNTV system, choosing among national lists of candidates vying for a limited number of PR seats. While most of the 150 **[End Page 139]** lower-house seats went to tribal sheikhs, businesspeople, and other conservatives, an assortment of leftists, centrists, maverick Islamists, and national-list candidates did surprisingly well. Still, parties remained virtually absent and most legislators remained formal "independents," an ongoing legacy of SNTV and other electoral rules that penalized party affiliation.

While the new Parliament was only superficially consulted as King Abdullah's appointed premier Abdullah Ensour formed a government, the real authoritarian trickery occurred over the next few years. Despite the king's rhetoric about transforming Jordan into a European-style constitutional monarchy by encouraging the development of political parties, the monarchy continued to sequester Parliament from decision making. With the palace and cabinet formulating all major domestic and foreign policies—and Ensour filling the premier's usual role as a punching bag for critics—legislators busied themselves trading corruption charges and engaging in personal squabbles that sometimes led to gunfire.

Meanwhile, a double campaign regarding parties began. The king spoke, typically in English, to Western audiences about the need for an organized multiparty system. At the same time, royal officials endlessly warned domestic, Arabic-speaking audiences that parties and partisan-ship would tear Jordan apart.[15] Parliament became the butt of tragicomic ridicule. Surveys conducted in December 2013 and February 2015 showed that about 75 percent of the public neither believed that the current Parliament had accomplished anything commendable nor thought that any elected legislature could

improve politics.[16] Further, only 12 percent had "a great deal" of confidence in Parliament as an institution. The comparable number for the military was 84 percent.

By the time the Muslim Brotherhood returned to electoral politics in September 2016, the damage had been done. Legal restrictions and internal splits had gutted its organizational structure. The monarchy and the ever-wary *mukhabarat* even felt confident enough to allow a new election law that shifted from SNTV to a mild form of list-based PR—something that had been seen as radical step when Islamists had demanded it a decade earlier. Under the new rules, the returning Islamist coalition captured fifteen seats, more than any other single party or bloc but still a meager total within a resized 130-deputy legislature. More importantly, Parliament continues to shrink in institutional stature compared to the monarchy. Just months before the election, in fact, the king quietly ratified new constitutional amendments that formalized as royal powers things that had once been treated as ad hoc (albeit never contested) privileges, such as the king's sole ability to fill top military, police, intelligence, and judicial posts.

The message is clear: Jordan faces threats. The Islamic State and the Syrian civil war are right next door. Parliament is a tangle of useless **[End Page 140]** bickering. Therefore, Jordanians should look to the Hashemite monarchy and its unelected organs as the guardians of order and stability. Just after the elections, with the new legislature still months from meeting, King Abdullah appointed a new prime minister and cabinet and reshuffled key military and security posts, citing failures to prevent terrorist attacks. There was little resistance, and the state-run media even celebrated these moves as a "soft coup." Was not the king, the media asked, only embodying the popular will to make Jordan safer?[17]

The conclusion to be drawn from this survey of Morocco and Jordan is a sobering one. Elections in these two monarchies are not meaningless charades, but neither are they evidence that structural pressures have generated momentum for democracy. Instead, the palaces view these brief democratic episodes as opportunities to expose the haplessness and inadequacies of nonmonarchical politics. If electoral life under democracy shows (ideally, at least) that participation and voting can result in competent leadership, in Morocco and Jordan the opposite lesson is being taught. Elections are being used to show that the politicians who emerge from them cannot be entrusted with the power to govern. By default, that leaves the palaces firmly in charge.

The Kids Are *Not* Alright

For the Moroccan and Jordanian regimes, this adaptive upgrading of ruling monarchism represents a long-term strategy for thriving in a region where political stability is a scarce and hence valuable commodity. The assumption is that discrediting formal participation and organized democratic forces will leave ruling monarchism as the only alternative. Yet this overlooks the huge and restive younger generation, the most likely source of future change. To undercut parliament is to make it more likely that such change will be revolutionary and probably not democratic.

As is the case in many Arab countries, the demography of these two kingdoms skews young. Citizens between ages 15 and 30 comprise a third of all Moroccans and Jordanians, with literacy rates and years of schooling that exceed the respective national averages.[18] Yet young people are also those most likely to face chronic joblessness. Neither the capital-intensive private sector nor the already-bloated public sector can absorb the glut of university graduates who enter the workforce each year. Youth unemployment is more than double the official rate of 10 percent in Morocco and 15 percent in Jordan, and even those figures are wide underestimates. In both countries, most people without jobs are in their twenties.

This social landscape matters. Electoralism cannot succeed over the long run without buy-in from the young. But the dominant feelings toward formal politics among young Moroccans and Jordanians today are **[End Page 141]** apathy and resentment. Alarmed, cabinet ministries and civil society groups alike have made increasing youth engagement a priority.[19] Although there is no data on this from systematic surveys, most field studies show that young people are the likeliest to abstain from voting. In Morocco, turnout dropped from an already disappointing 46 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2016. In Jordan, turnout was less than 57 percent in 2013, and technically dropped to 36 percent in 2016. This, however, was mostly due to a quirk: The separate voter-registration process was done away with, so all citizens henceforth automatically could vote. The electorate jumped from 2.3 million to 4.1 million. Yet despite this, only about two-hundred thousand more raw votes were cast in 2016—hardly the number

desired by those royal officials who ran the biggest national marketing campaign to encourage voter turnout in Jordanian history.

Young people who are not voting are not joining established civil society groups or opposition forces either. Young dissidents see mainstream actors as nothing but loyal cogs in the very system that needs changing. This includes Morocco's PJD, older leftist parties, and labor unions as well as Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and vocal professional syndicates, Young people see themselves as not only activists but social entrepreneurs who actively reject traditional ideologies, whether Islamist or secularist. The largest parties and civic organizations have youth sections, but they are largely symbolic. In Morocco, for instance, the youth cohorts of the PJD and other opposition parties play only a small role in party affairs at the national level and have trouble drawing new members.[20]

Sociologists and demographers have warned of the Arab world's looming youth bulge for decades, yet only during the Arab Spring did it become clear that this cohort could mobilize outside formal channels and challenge autocratic incumbents. Indeed, in Morocco and Jordan, these activists in their twenties are the closest thing either country has seen to a revolutionary vanguard. Alone among regime critics, they have dared to cross the red line of attacking the monarchy's religious and historical legitimacy.

In Morocco, elements of Feb20 (the protest movement named for demonstrations that began on 20 February 2011) went far beyond normal slogans demanding bread and dignity to directly question the validity of Alaouite rule.[21] Some accused King Mohammed and his cronies of corruption; others called for his removal altogether, questioning the kingship's religious standing and calling for a socialist republic. The same radicalism radiated from Jordan's *hirak*, grassroots movements from tribal communities that had long been bastions of loyalty to the monarchy. *Hiraki* youths did the unthinkable by defacing King Abdullah's likeness, lampooning his alleged gambling habits, and comparing the Hashemite family to a criminal gang.[22] Many fearlessly chanted for royal abdication, a demand not publicly uttered with **[End Page 142]** any consistency since the "Black September" civil war of 1970 that left thousands dead.

Uncertain Pathways, Cataclysmic Futures

The final takeaway regarding the current social landscape concerns youth activists' potential to become agents of political change. To the palaces, this new generation, with its penchant for shunning formal institutions and eluding old methods of control, stands in stark contrast to its elders, whose activism had been far more predictable and easier to contain.

Traditional civil society requires physical means of organization, but the new, informal movements spurn these as vulnerabilities. Not for them are the brick-and-mortar offices that house trade unions, political parties, and human-rights groups—offices that the authorities can raid, lock down, and surveil. Cafes and private homes are preferable, and go well with the practice of operating in separate cells that can keep a movement going even if its leaders are repressed or silenced.[23]

There is no interest in foreign funding either. Western NGOs and democracy-promotion programs may be well meant, the thinking goes, but they also tend to impose compromising demands while at the same time making activism seem less "authentic" to everyday citizens. Finally, civic initiatives are "organic"—knit together exclusively by Face-book and WhatsApp and free of the licenses and incorporation papers that an interior minister can take away.[24] Not being legal associations at all, organic initiatives are likewise outside court-enforced legal restrictions on the same.

Civil society and opposition groups continue to grab Western headlines and the lion's share of academic study—in part because they are easy to find and research, with members who will sit for interviews. But such groups are no longer the only bellwethers of political change in Morocco and Jordan. Furtive and dispersed youth networks represent a likely source of future resistance and unrest. Indeed, over the past year alone, these networks have flexed their muscle in response to new economic and political problems. Moroccan activists marched at the forefront of those protesting the fisherman's death in Hoceima, as demonstrators filled the streets of major cities and social media lit up with young citizens questioning their entire political system. In Jordan, youth groups rallied against a natural-gas deal inked with an Israeli conglomerate. In September 2016, they expressed fury at the state's failure to protect well-known journalist Nahed Hattar from being assassinated on the steps of the national

courthouse over a cartoon (deemed disrespectful of Islam) that he had posted on Facebook.[25]

Such episodes are portents of future confrontations with recalcitrant ruling monarchies insistent that their authoritarian order is best. Looking **[End Page 143]** ahead, two types of sparks could ignite firestorms resembling the Arab Spring. The first would be a sharp worsening of the already grim economic situation. The regimes in both Morocco and Jordan have been barely keeping a lid on joblessness and poverty with foreign aid and investment. If the lid comes off, it is hard to say what will happen. Festering economic frustration does not always spawn spontaneous mobilization, but it is reasonable to assume that it makes such mobilization more likely. People feeling materially satisfied amid ample employment opportunities are not generally considered the stuff of which revolutions are made.

The second type of spark would be a grotesque act of injustice clearly linked to the establishment. The December 2010 self-immolation of an obscure Tunisian fruit vendor driven to desperation by abusive police in his little-known hometown was all it took to set off the massive shocks of the Arab Spring. Like the ill-fated authoritarian president of Tunisia, ruling monarchs have cabinet governments whose job duties include catching the flak for bad policies and social crises. Anger over the fishmonger's death in Morocco and the natural-gas deal in Jordan may have been deflected onto appointed royal subordinates, but there is no guarantee that such deflection will always work. A corruption scandal or a political blunder directly attributable to a king or a palace inner circle could cause an explosion. These regimes realize this. Morocco has long banned open discussion of royal matters including business deals and personal habits. Jordan followed suit this past year, banning the publication of any news coverage of the king and his family not vetted by the court's in-house media unit. Yet as youth groups showed in the Arab Spring, such laws are effective only when citizens are willing to follow them.

Could regime change come by imposition from below? Yes, but it need not mean democratization. The new entrepreneurs of dissent who have emerged since the Arab Spring are mostly secular. Yet they have no distinctive ideology, and observers should not fall into the trap of conflating young with liberal. More than a few Moroccan and Jordanian youth groups, for instance, display deep intolerance toward significant groups in their societies. Not all Moroccan activists are comfortable with the elevation of Berber culture and language in a predominantly Arab country. Similarly, some of Jordan's younger tribal dissidents reproduce their elders' antipathy to their country's Palestinian majority.

The lack of ideology makes for organizational flexibility but offers **[End Page 144]** no guidance as to what projects or policies will be pursued if and when the hated status quo is overturned. Will there be a push for constitutional monarchy, wherein the king reigns but does not rule, or will republicanism win the day as it did when Greece did away with its monarchy in the mid-1970s? Will there even be a commitment to regular elections on the part of groups that reject electoralism? Without such a commitment, democratization cannot proceed, much less consolidate.

However all this may turn out, there can be no denying that youth sectors are—and likely will remain—the prime sources of resistance to the ruling monarchies in Morocco and Jordan, which are seeking to undermine organized opposition through enhanced rhetorical and electoral manipulation. In both countries, these two forces—the youth and the ruling monarchy—are gaining steam and heading toward collision. It is far from clear whether either will turn aside or slow down.

Sean Yom

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NOTES

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