



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Arab Reform Bulletin
November 2005, Volume 3, Issue 9
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Jordan: Knives Out for the National Agenda

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On October 22, Jordan's "reform czar" Marwan Muasher announced that the National Agenda, billed as a comprehensive road map to reform, would not be released until after Ramadan due to "printing and proofreading" problems. This minor debacle had been building for some time, with fierce pre-emptive attacks on the Agenda in the press and equivocation on the part of Prime Minister Adnan Badran about how binding the Agenda would be. By the end of October leading columnists were writing of the Agenda in the past tense, while Amman was abuzz with speculation about an impending change of government or dissolution of Parliament.

Work on the National Agenda began in February 2005 in response to international concerns and growing domestic frustrations over a sputtering economy and a stalled, repressive political status quo. After six years in power, King Abdullah II had little to show for his frequent speeches about reform. His tenure has been characterized by a steady decline in freedoms: a raft of repressive temporary laws; nearly two years without a parliament (2001-2003); and tighter controls on the media and public assembly. Public opinion polls reveal widespread public alienation, with 80 percent responding to one survey that they did not feel safe criticizing the government in public. In late 2004, matters took a turn for the worse, as Interior Minister Samir Habashneh's attempts to strip professional associations of their political role led to tense showdowns with demonstrators in the streets. Although the Bush administration maintained a careful public silence about Jordan's democratic failings in appreciation of its help in regional affairs, Abdullah faced criticism in the U.S. media over the kingdom's increasingly undemocratic image.

The king therefore charged the National Agenda Committee with developing a roadmap to reform all sectors of economic and political life. Abdullah summarily dismissed Prime Minister Faisal Al Fayez, charging his replacement Badran with implementing comprehensive reforms and giving National Agenda Committee head Muasher a dominant role in Badran's

government. Badran faced unprecedented parliamentary resistance, however, with a bloc of conservative members of parliament joining the traditional opposition in a threat to deny him a vote of confidence. Badran ultimately won a confidence vote only after months of political jockeying and sacrificing one of his key ministers, controversial Finance Minister Bassam Awadallah. The Palace's inability to secure Badran's immediate confirmation revealed widespread resistance to the king's vision of reform, prompting him to unleash a withering attack on the entire political class in an extraordinary address. With these wounds still fresh, the knives were out for the National Agenda regardless of its contents.

While the Agenda has not yet been published as of this writing, its main contours have become clear in a number of press conferences, speeches, and press accounts. The Agenda would offer a ten-year plan for comprehensive reform in eight sectors—education, infrastructure, employment, social welfare, finances, the judiciary, investment, and political development. Among worthy, if potentially unrealistic, goals were universal health coverage by 2012, a major overhaul of the tax system, increased spending on scientific research, and a significant cut in unemployment through the creation of 600,000 new jobs. Ideas for political reform are far less developed and more controversial. Most damagingly, the Agenda's drafters failed to achieve consensus on a new electoral system, instead offering a number of possible solutions—including the principle of a mixed system incorporating elements of proportional representation—and leaving it to the government to decide.

The Agenda has failed to spark a constructive national debate or to build a public consensus for its vision of reform. The proposal to end compulsory membership in the Journalists Association infuriated the media, turning many opinion makers against it before its release. Conservatives resent the Agenda's attack on entrenched privileges; parliament resents its move to change the electoral system; the opposition fears that it will be used to the government's benefit; liberals worry that it will sacrifice political reforms; and the professional associations fear that it will challenge their political role. In addition, ethnic Jordanian nationalists fanned fears that the Agenda would transform the identity of the state, empowering Palestinians and even paving the way to Jordanian rule of the West Bank.

Six years of unfulfilled promises have cast serious doubts on King Abdullah's commitment to democracy. If the National Agenda fails to produce real political reform, as appears increasingly likely, these doubts will multiply. This would pose a serious challenge to the Bush administration, which in public has largely praised Jordan's reform efforts. If it continues to do so even in the event of the National Agenda's failure, this would likely alleviate any sense of urgency on the part of the King. It would also prove to many Arab observers that Washington's talk of breaking with past support for cooperative authoritarian rulers was indeed only talk.

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