

Designed to survive?

The institutional capabilities of Morocco and Jordan

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This paper focuses on how the monarchies in Jordan and Morocco both evaded the protests that spread during the Arab Spring. The paper claims that this is made possible not only as a result of their financial resources, but because of an intelligent use of institutions that has been nurtured over time to create a more resilient monarchy. The two kings are as symbols of nationhood in principle above politics, but at the same time they are at the centre of politics, being involved in every institutional aspect of the state. A series of institutional reforms over the past decades has in reality just broadened and strengthened the resilience of the two monarchies.

In a recent op-ed in *World Policy Journal*, Jordan's King Abdullah II called the Arab Spring a "wake-up call" that was needed to reform the country and named himself the "guarantor" of the reform process towards a more liberal democratic constitutional monarchy¹². In reality, the large number of recent institutional reforms just solidified the King's position in Jordan. Likewise in Morocco where the Arab Spring led to several institutional reforms that changed little but pleased some of the protesters. There seems to be a historical pattern in the two monarchies being exceptional in times of crisis, having evaded civil wars and attempted coup d'états with minor institutional reforms.

With turmoil in Egypt, instability in Libya, and the continuing conflict in Syria, the Arab Spring has been pronounced dead by many analysts. Intriguingly, two of the most stable countries in the Middle East, Morocco and Jordan, have managed to ride the wave of discontent with only minor reforms and a symbolic changing of guards. Despite arguments that Morocco could experience a spill-over from the recent war in Mali and Jordan would be unsettled by a spill-over from Syria, both monarchs are sitting steadfastly on the throne.

This paper will argue that the monarchies in Jordan and Morocco solidified their power and control of policy decision-making in the early years of decolonization through formal and informal state institutions. This is most clear in Jordan where the role of the monarchy has evolved in accordance with the state and its institutions. The monarchical systems in Jordan and Morocco allow the kings to remain above politics while also at the centre of political life; from the early days of the modern monarchies, the palaces have been involved in state building and at the centre of institutional changes. Through this expanding institutional control, the palaces have designed a system that has survived several challenges in the past 60 years, the Arab Spring being the latest of these. Despite both countries facing the same socio-economic challenges as their neighbouring "Arab Spring States" with increasing youth unemployment, increased food prices, cuts in subsidies and decreasing income, both have managed to overcome the protests that spread in early 2011.

Institutions as protective buffer zones

It is clear that the institutional systems of the two countries allow the King to be above politics, acting as an arbiter while at the same time being at the centre of all the state's institutions, the formal as well as and the informal ones. Thus, like a master puppeteer the King controls the movements of key political actors while avoiding taking the blame for the failures of the faux democratic game of façade politics. Essentially the King is

¹ http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/opEds/view/id/48.html (accessed on 01/10/13)

² <http://en.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleno=23141#.UkHpqtLIZaX> (accessed on 24/09/2013)

able to sacrifice key actors in the institutions and thereby use them as buffers against the discontent of the public. This was clear during the Arab Spring in Jordan during which there was a series of rapid changes of prime ministers throughout 2011 and 2012.

Admittedly, such institutional buffers might not be unique for the monarchical system, but the fact that the monarchs are not constrained by any ideology makes it easier for them to jump on the political bandwagon, shifting from socialism to Islamism, from liberalism to nationalism, sometimes only in a matter of days. In one speech, the Moroccan King Mohammed VI will speak as a representative of all Muslims in the world, while defining the clear demarcation line in the south in the following. He will promote unity among all groups and social welfare, while also having some of the most liberal business laws in the region. In comparison with some of the republics in the region, the monarchies are not limited by the initial ideology that lay the foundation of the state. During the Arab Spring, several institutional and constitutional reforms were launched very early on in Morocco, on the wave of the first protests. This ability to be able to offer more concessions to the opposition in times of protest is clear in the monarchies. Often these concessions are the creation of new institutions, like in Jordan with the creation of the Independent Electoral Commission or various human rights councils in Morocco. A further benefit to the monarchical system is that when a ruler dies, the issue of succession has already been resolved. Knowing the successor does not only create stability for a monarchy but it also allows for heirs to prepare in advance for their future roles by building up patronage networks and learning from the previous ruler – without having to keep the political system they inherit. Of course there will be issues around family structures but less so than in a republic, where often several officers are willing to step in to take over, often in the spur of the moment. In the Gulf States, where the family influence is distributed on more people, succession offers a greater challenge as well. In Saudi Arabia, around 200 princes have important positions³. Crucially, the legitimacy of the monarchs as rulers does not come from phony rigged elections but is instead seen as “the king’s burden”, passed on from father to son.

Being the “spider” at the centre of this complex institutional web grants the king omnipotence as a distributor of benefits to emerging elite groups and traditional core supporters. Over the years, the palaces in Jordan and Morocco have managed to build up a solid network in both business and politics, in the army and in GONGOs. When the institutions are not aligned with the palaces, they are often being re-shaped. When the secret service has become too powerful in Morocco, the palace has stepped in. In Jordan the king was very outspoken against the secret service in an interview in April 2013. He was “disappointed” with them and considered them an opposition to his reforms. King Abdullah has dealt with it by manifesting his control and two former chiefs of the GID

³ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/75aae7ea-cc82-11df-a6c7-00144feab49a.html?siteedition=uk#axzz2ickEYy1q> (accessed 24/10/2013)

has been put in jail over corruption charges⁴. Still, each has allowed for new actors to slowly be included in new institutions at a controllable pace. This flexibility and adroitness guarantees the king power without responsibility, while others will have plenty of responsibility but no real power. This in turn allows for the continued existence of several pseudo-democratic structures, like parliament, where the public might vote in elections but have largely given up on party politics. All of the above show how the king is above politics but at the centre political life, a sovereign in the true sense of the word.

Institutional reform rather than religious legitimacy

Some commentators argue that, having survived Pan-Arabism, Nasserism and now the Arab Spring, the monarchies have gained legitimacy by default. Therefore, the public accepts the role of the king, as long as the monarchical system creates stability and as long as the neighbouring republics crumble. Several protests occurred in Morocco and Jordan over the socio-economic situation during the Arab Spring but very few protesters called for an end to the monarchy or the resignation of the king; in the republics, the slogan echoing in the streets was “down with the ruler”. The argument put forward by some, for example Michael Herb, that the chaos following the street protests made it obvious to the public that a republic was not necessarily any better than a monarchy, is incomplete and only answers part of the question; likewise with the argument that the monarchies survived because of the religious legitimacy of the Moroccan and Jordanian kings (both claim to be descendants of the prophet Muhammad)⁵. These explanations do not provide the main reasons, since the people in neither of the neighbouring republics have called for the reinstatement of a constitutional monarchy. Nor did King Abdullah II and Mohammed VI use their religious legitimacy to any wide extent in their public statements to the protesters. Instead they both responded to the protests with a call for institutional and constitutional reforms, resembling genuine democratic initiatives, so it seems that the legitimacy partly arises from the two states’ institutional structures.

Morocco acted quickly and decisively to calm the protests with a combination of brute force, direct payments and façade politics with constitutional changes and parliamentary elections. Jordan opted for the “Standard Operating Procedure” (for example, salary increases and using PM Rifai as a scapegoat) but in the end calmed the worst of the protests with some relatively controlled but also more open parliamentary elections than before, according to international monitors. In both countries the existing institutions were used to quell the protests, by firing the prime ministers, changing the wording of the constitutions and introducing new “democratic” institutions. The institutions were blamed by the protesters for having failed and they demanded reforms. Both pal-

⁴ http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/monarch-in-the-middle/309270/?single_page=true (Accessed 08/10 2013)

⁵ http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/26/monarchism_matters (accessed on 24/10 2013)

aces reacted to the protesters with minor “imitative” institutional reforms and promises of a better future, but these represent more preparation for the challenges of tomorrow, not for the challenges of the next decades. Throughout the protests and afterwards, the focus has been on institutions rather than the king as rulers. Some would argue there has been an increase in transparency and democracy, but the real power has not ceded from the king.

Since decolonization in the 1940s, both countries have built up very similar institutional structures and have also been faced with similar critical junctures. The monarchies have been flexible in allowing new groups into the influential circles, for example with the co-optation of Islamists, while also using coercive means when considered necessary, for example against Western Sahara or the PLO. These sets of experiences and the long-term construction of new coalitions have made it easier for the palaces to deal the conflicts related to the Arab Spring, where many of the issues were similar to previous challenges. Some solutions are standard procedures.

One such trick of the trade has been the portrayal of any problems as “intrasocietal conflicts” rather than popular opposition to the monarchy. By portraying the monarchy as society’s uniting force they have managed to oust any challengers thus gaining further legitimacy. The fact that these narratives can be used and adapted is largely due to the weakness of the state’s institutions in each country. Of course it is still down to the loyalty of the “king’s men”, from businessmen to the armed forces, to make sure that the institutions are in line with palace directives but the institutions can rarely build up a powerbase alone, whereas in the republics the most powerful institution is the secret service or the army, as has been most recently in Syria and Egypt

One major new challenge has been the increasing use of social media among the protesters. The internet offers a new challenge to the regimes, which they have little prior knowledge of. Social networks offer a new institutional challenge that the monarchs cannot co-opt or pay their way out of. Instead both countries have reacted with draconian laws, as Jordan for example did in September 2012 (RSF, 2012).

It is not only the institutions in Morocco and Jordan that can explain why there have been no major changes; knowing how to use the institutions is as important as having them. This means, getting the most out of the institutions by for example distributing important positions or using some institutions for “donor talks”. Likewise with money; knowing how to distribute wealth is as important as having some. The clearest case of this was in Libya where plenty of wealth did not avoid a revolution. Due to the complex institutional networks in the two countries, this also comes at a cost. In Jordan, the salary to public sector workers accounts for a large part of the budget and both in Morocco and Jordan, the military has been used as a means to distribute favours through a secret budget. Thus, with the increased socio-economic challenges of the past years, one can only conclude that it will not be the institutional design that causes the collapse of the non-oil rich monarchies, but instead the lack of funding to keep up appearances. In this

way we need to build a theoretical bridge between historical institutionalism and rentier theory. Institutions itself does not lead to stability, likewise is wealth not a safeguard against revolutions, but together they can be used effectively. In addition, sometimes the monarchy as an institution can have certain benefits in alliances. The monarchical system partly explains why the Gulf States have given huge aid packages to both Morocco and Jordan and offered them a seat in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Samaan 2012, 22) (Trust 2013). The monarchies in the Middle East stand united so far and with great stability apart from some challenges in Bahrain. The combination with wealth and effective institution-building can be an effective tool against any challenges from opposition groups. With the EU's focus on "sustainable economic growth" as a means to the "promotion of democratic institutions" they might actually just strengthen the king's powers since they control almost all of the institutions (European Union 2013, 1). The palaces' network expands out to both the public and the private sector and with increased funding they will strengthen their control. The monarchs can at the same time launch human rights oriented councils and association controlled by the state to please the donor countries.

Conclusion

The survival of the non-oil rich monarchies in the Middle East is not primarily related to culture or customs, as some analyst have claimed (Yom and Gause III, 75). Instead it is the effective manipulation of state institutions over time, thus allowing the Kings to be above politics while at the same time at the centre of it. The palaces allow for everyday non-influential politics to go on while controlling the real political changes. In this way, the actors from the faux political game can be sacrificed as scapegoats without any major effects. So far, the public has demanded institutional reforms and have seen some results; albeit not dealing with the real democratic deficit of the sovereign king. However, it is strongly linked to the financial capability of Jordan and Morocco to sustain this complex network of institutions at all levels of the state. The financial capability is fragile since most of it is built on external funding from the US or the gulf monarchies. Especially the GCC has increased their funding to keep the monarchies in Jordan and Morocco following the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was just one in a series of challenges that Morocco and Jordan have survived with minor institutional reforms and façade politics, the previous complex institutional networks are still there to keep the king and his allies in control. As long as they have funding for the institutions, they will sit steadily on the throne.

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