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ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
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DOES JORDAN NEED A KING?

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The passing away of King Hussein of Jordan has evoked various reactions around the world. Heads of state rushed to pay their respect, the media had a heyday in eulogizing the departing king, and journalists and political scientists were generous in commenting on the king's achievements and the vacuum he leaves behind. They also expressed doubts regarding the ability of the new King Abdullah to fill that vacuum. However, a few commentators went the other way and asked whether King Hussein did really achieve much for Jordan, other than what he achieved for himself, his family, and his friends. The major question which has not been raised is whether Jordan does need a King! The answer might be not only provocative, but also embarrassing, for various reasons. Jordan does not have a long enough history of a monarchy to claim a tradition that is worth preserving. More than half of the population are of Palestinian origin and have no tradition of a monarchy and would rather do without one. Jordan cannot afford a constitutional monarchy in the tradition of Britain, which is too costly and archaic. Furthermore, Jordan cannot afford an absolute monarchy either, as King Hussein's was, if it aims to achieve economic development and political democracy.

People of all walks of life have been uttering wondrous, inquisitive, sometimes wise, and often irrelevant judgments on changes of the power structure in Jordan. Will political stability be maintained? Will conflict within the Hashemite dynasty be forthcoming and dangerous? Will the new King be as friendly to Israel as were his father and his namesake grandfather, and will he be able to deal with the social and political ills of the country better than both his predecessor kings did? In particular, will democracy have a chance and will the economy develop under the new king any more or faster than it has in the last half century? Awareness of these questions is bound to lead to more questions, many of which have no ready answers.

King Hussein's Jordan seemed like a medieval feudal estate in which lord of the manor was the absolute authority, the single most privileged beneficiary, and the most generous and most stingy, all at once, as he dealt with his subjects. Many became wealthy in Hussein's Jordan, but the majority of the people remained poor. Many thought they had power, but only as long as they stayed subservient and obedient. Many thought they had freedom and democracy, but only as these values were interpreted by the King. Prime ministers were replaced as easily as shuffling a deck of cards. The parliament was dissolved with a stroke of the King's pen. Journalist were jailed and their media closed down at the whim of the monarch.

King Abdullah the first set the stage for his grandson, the late King Hussein, by playing into the hands of the British, as Hussein did into the hands of the Americans. Both also cooperated with Israel and accommodated the Palestinians for a price. Abdullah the First

accommodated the Palestinians in return for the West Bank. King Hussein also accommodated the Palestinian for the same price. He gave them citizenship and treated them like his "other" children, but he did not hesitate to gun them down in the 1970 Black September.

King Hussein ruled Jordan with an iron hand, the iron being designed and manufactured by his patron states, the UK, the US, and Israel, all in the name of political stability, safety of Middle East oil, and the security of Israel. The King was shrewd, able to maintain his power and authority while several Arab monarchies were being eliminated. And yet, the people of Jordan have remained poor, deprived of individual freedom, and excluded from governance of the country.

King Hussein summarily deposed his brother, the would-be King Hassan and appointed his son in his place, but the people of Jordan had little to say about the change. Apparently the US was the major consultant in the process. King Hussein reconstituted the line of succession and thus the source of power, authority, and absolute rule over the people without any pretense of consideration of their wishes and expectations. And so has the new King Abdullah who appointed one of his younger brothers as crown prince, and his wife as Queen, with no evident consultation with the people, or assessment of popular sentiment. (Rumor has it that Prince Hassan was more an Arab nationalist than King Hussein was, and had less sympathy towards Israel and the Palestine National Authority than did the King; this reminds me of the rumors that followed the exile of Hussein's father King Talal to Turkey on the pretense that he was mentally unstable; the rumors then were that he disagreed with the policies that had been dictated and followed by his father, King Abdullah, towards Britain and Israel and therefore he had to go).

Monarchies still exist in developed and democratic countries, but in all of them the monarch plays a symbolic role only, leaving power and authority to reside in the people who elect the government and hold it accountable, as in Britain and Scandinavia. Countries with absolute monarchies have remained economically underdeveloped and poor, as in Jordan and Morocco. Even the Gulf countries have remained underdeveloped; their wealth has resulted from natural endowments and the know-how and investments of the developed countries, rather than from the efforts and achievements of their own people. It is obvious that absolute monarchies are incompatible with democracy and are apparently an obstacle in the way of economic development.

Jordan is now at a cross-roads: To promote political democracy, develop the economy, reduce unemployment, poverty, and economic dependence on foreign aid for "survival", or to continue the pattern of economic and political dependence as has been the case since its independence. The options are limited: 1. Jordan can persist in the same pattern, though it can hardly be considered viable, given the world wide tendency toward economic and political globalization, and the sentiment toward democracy and participatory governance. 2. Jordan can explore abolishing the monarchy and establishing a presidential/parliamentary system which allows the people to choose their government and hold it accountable for its actions. This option is most unlikely at the present time if it is to be implemented by peaceful means. 3. Jordan can, even though it is costly, opt for a truly constitutional monarchy in which the monarch plays a symbolic, honorary role, while power, responsibility, and accountability reside in the people.

It is easy for an outsider to recommend one approach or the other, but only the people of Jordan can decide the road they should follow. Let us hope that King Abdullah and the people of Jordan

find the right path and realize economic and political freedom, both of which are cherished objectives around the world.

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