

Chapter 1

Transformation of the Ruling Coalition in Contemporary Jordan: Implications from the Process of Decentralization

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1. Introduction

The question of the Jordanian monarchy's stability has gathered academic attention for several decades. This question is becoming more important today: political and economic liberal reforms are prevalent in the Arab world but authoritarian rulers in the region have been holding on to their rule. The liberal reforms will apparently lead to democratization, but it seems not to be the case in the Arab region. Jordan is one of the first countries among Arab monarchies that started liberal reforms, which means that the Hashimite monarchy is one of the best examples in addressing this issue.

This chapter focuses on the case study of decentralization in Jordan, one of the most recent political reforms in the country. This research is based on the author's fieldwork in Jordan in the summer of 2019, under the fellowship of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

This chapter consists of four parts. The first section will address the contemporary politics of Jordan. The second section will describe the social and political backgrounds that decentralization emerges from. In part three, the author is going to look into the case studies of decentralization. After a brief introduction of the case of decentralization, two issues are examined. One is the function of a newly

created local council named governmental Council, *Majlis al-Muḥāfaẓa* in Arabic. The other is the discussion about the amendment to the decentralization law. The final part will conclusion and implications for the stability of the Jordanian monarchy in this era.



Figure 1. The Monastery of Ad Deir in Petra

Source: Getty Images

2. Contemporary Politics in Jordan

Jordan is a monarchy whose king has significant political power at the center of the regional regime. Despite its poor racist conditions, the monarchy has maintained its rule since its birth in the 1920s. It is widely argued that the monarchy's durability is supported by its indigenous, Trans-Jordanian or sometimes called Jordanian-Jordanian population.

In Jordan today, people of Palestinian origin, Palestinian Jordanians, outnumber the indigenous Trans-Jordanians. Such Palestinian Jordanians may live in urban areas whereas Trans-Jordanians dominate the rural areas. Then why is such a minority group, Trans-Jordanians the key to regional maintenance? Their importance is due to the

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historically created divide and rule attitude between Trans-Jordanian and Palestinian-Jordanians, especially after the clash between the Jordanian government and the Palestinian militia in 1970, the so-called Black September Organization. Palestinian Jordanians came to be regarded as a potential opposition to the regime, and under this social distrust among the population the regime formalized a kind of division of labor, where Trans-Jordanians dominated the public sector and were provided with a range of public resources including preferential social welfare, employment opportunities, especially joining the military, and other forms of social services.

On the other hand, Palestinian Jordanians dominated the private sector, but they did not have well granted access to public resources. Besides, this division of labor presupposed the population's acceptance of the reigning regime, which meant that such a political economic contract was accompanied by authoritarian repression of the opposition. As such the Jordanian regime relied on Trans-Jordanians as a royal supporting base under the country's social ethnological divisions in exchange for the public resources.

However, such a ruling formula reached a turning point at the end of the 1980s. The country's economic downfall made it impossible for the regime to sustain the Trans-Jordanian favoring governance. Such governance put high pressures on the state budget. With international financial institutions support, mainly the IMF and World Bank. The country started to introduce a series of neoliberal market reforms, including reducing subsidies to fuels, privatizing the nationally owned companies and trade liberalization. This precedent was accelerated in the era of the new King Abdullah II from 1999, and a free trade agreement with the US that was signed in 2000, just a short period after the new king's succession, is the most prominent example of this liberalization. It was the first FTA between the US and the Arab countries.



Figure 2. King Abdullah II of Jordan

Source: Getty Images

In pursuing such economic liberalization policies, the king has recruited business oriented technocratic elites to the region. This policy inevitably undermined the dominance of the ruling coalition and neoliberal elites in the ruling regime.

Based on these political and economic developments, students of Jordanian politics have started to question the country's stability under Trans-Jordanians' support for the regime. For example, Curtis Ryan (2011) mentioned a conflict between Trans-Jordanian old guards and neoliberal elites in the ruling regime. However, this research field is still under development, and thus we need more detailed analysis on this topic, and this study aims at filling this gap and deepening our understanding of Jordanian politics and Arab monarchies.

Based on this understanding, this chapter aims to address this question: What effect does the transformation of the ruling coalition of the Jordanian regime from the Trans-Jordanian elites dominated coalition to a coalition with newly rising neoliberal elites, have in

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Jordanian politics? Here the words “ruling coalition” derive from the theory of authoritarianism, which is defined as those individuals who support the government and jointly with the dictator hold enough power to be necessary and sufficient for its survival (Svolik, 2009, 478).

The point here is that that ruling coalition is considered as the focal point of power sharing in the authoritarian regime. The authoritarian regime’s maintenance depends on the region’s ability to keep the ruling coalition united and prevent an organized revolt against the existing regime. Here you can see the importance of this study of the course of Jordanian politics, which not only reflects the characteristics of the authoritarian rule in Jordan today, but lies at the center of the stability of the Jordanian monarchy.

Based on this situation, this study examines the decentralization reform as a case study. This reform is one of Jordan’s most recent political reforms starting from 2007. The Jordanian state has historically been centralized, but the country is attempting to transfer authority and responsibility to intermediate and local governments. Decentralization is defined by Litvack and Seddon (1999) as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to intermediate and local governments or quasi-independent government organizations and/or the private sector. As this definition implies, the process of decentralization covers various dimensions in society. However, this study concentrates its focus on the decentralization reform’s political and administrative dimensions and attempts to grasp its influence on the country’s ruling coalition.

Why do the decentralization reforms matter to the ruling coalition? Because the decentralization process includes the transfer of authority from the central government to the sub-national governments, it inevitably concerns elites at the center of the government and other trans-Jordanian elites in the rural areas. This decentralization could

affect the stability of the ruling coalition.

Furthermore, this research adopts the perspective of multi-level governance. The point here is twofold. Firstly, this study attempts to examine the case of decentralization not solely as the issue of lawmaking at the central government level, nor of local politics independent of the politics of the center, but that of the interaction between the center and local politics. This is a gap in the current scholarship of Jordanian studies, which addresses central and local politics separately.

Secondly, the study takes the decision-making power as the power able to determine the distribution of state resources. This applies to almost all political entities in the world, but it significantly applies to the case of Jordan, where the distribution of state resources has been extensively employed to gain support from the constituencies, especially from Trans-Jordanians as mentioned before. Therefore, this chapter will show an attempt to examine the effect of decentralization on the mechanism of state resource distribution in Jordan from the perspective of multi-level governance. Before going into details about the case of decentralization, the following section briefly looks at the current situation of the ruling coalition Jordan.

3. Ruling Coalition in Jordan: Social and Political Backgrounds of Decentralization

As was mentioned earlier, there is a political cleavage between indigenous Trans-Jordanians, for short TJ and Palestinian-Jordanians, for short PJ. This cleavage was politicized and created a division of labor, upon which the Hashemite regime kept its stability. However, such a formula has been under pressure since the beginning of neoliberal policies.

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Faced with the challenge, the regime had to create a new ruling strategy to maintain support from the TJ population instead of depending on generous state resource distributions. The regime subsequently created a new ruling strategy: competitive clientelism.

This is a term coined by Ellen Lust (2009). The regime maintains support for TJ deputies and provides the constituencies with a certain degree of access to state resources. This system is supported by the TJ favored or rural favored election system, which grants more value to the votes of rural constituencies than those in the urban areas.

The political development we have seen thus far shows how the Jordanian regime succeeded in transforming their ruling strategy to maintain the status quo under the changing conditions that the region rests upon. However, the regime also introduced a new strategy, different from the previous formula. It was the active, incremental appointment of business oriented technical elites to the government or newly created advisory organizations through royal appointments.

The recruitment reflects technological technocratic considerations but was viewed as a potential threat to the TJ elites vested interests. This rise of business elites created political competition between them and traditional TJ elites in the ruling coalition, both in the form of conflict and compromise. The rights of business elites in the Jordanian regime are reflected in the appointment of prime ministers as can be seen in this figure. In a democratic Parliament system such as we can see in the UK or Japan, the prime minister is chosen by the majority in the parliament. However, in the case of Jordan, the appointment is made at the King's discretion.

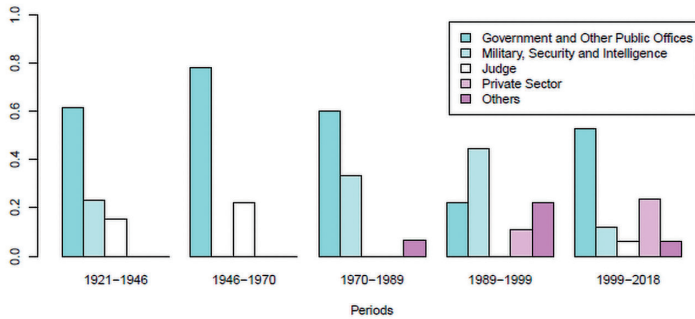


Figure 3. Pattern of Career Background of the Appointed Prime Ministers
Source: The Author

The Figure 3 illustrates the trends in the appointment of the prime minister in Jordanian history classified by the appointee's background. Though this tells us that the government and other public offices are the prime route to the Prime Ministership, when we have a closer look at the recent trends since 1989, we can find a significant increase of prime ministers from the private sector.

4. Case Studies: Decentralization in Jordan

In the following section, I will analyze the case of decentralization in Jordan, focusing on the conflict and compromise between the two groups in the ruling coalition namely Trans-Jordanian elites and business-oriented technocrats.

Jordan has a two-tier local administration system with ninety-nine municipalities (*baladiyya*) and twelve governorates (*muhāfaẓa*), and three special districts. Roughly speaking, the government is the same as a county in the UK and prefecture in Japan.

The difference between these two types of local administration

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lies in the degree of autonomy and jurisdiction they are subjected to. The municipality has some degree of autonomy, having its budget and elected mayor, and it is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of local administration.

There exists some discussion on the degree of substantial autonomy in the municipality, but mostly the ministry has enjoyed some degree of autonomy since the formulation of municipal law in 1954.

Conversely, the governorates have been under substantial control of the Ministry of Interior, which decides the budget and appoints the administrator, or *muḥāfiẓ* in Arabic.

The centrally appointed *muḥāfiẓ* enjoys his discretion in the decision making at the governate by utilizing his firm grip on the security apparatus, which is also governed by the Ministry of Interior.



Figure 4. Parliamentary Elections in Jordan

Source: Getty Images

The decentralized election reform challenges this centralized local administration in Jordan. Ten years after King Abdullah II announced the district's decentralization plan, the decentralization law was formulated in 2015.

It strengthened the local autonomy of the municipalities and governorates by establishing an elected council for the first time in Jordanian history at the level of governorate. Its first election was conducted in 2017, as well as the council's election at the municipality level of the mayor and newly elected figures hold office for four years.

The following sections examine the situations of the first term since the decentralization law was enacted and the election was held and the discussions over amending the decentralization law. These studies focus on the multi-level governance and not solely on the politics of center nor on the local politics.

(1) First Term of Decentralization in Jordan

This is an analysis of the first term of decentralization in Jordan since 2017. Under the decentralization law, there are three levels of local elections in Jordan: governorate council, mayor, and municipal and local councils. Despite the difference in the type of elections, the elections' overall results were the same, that is, the dominance of tribal figures. One of the most prominent independent newspapers in Jordan *al-Ghad*, reported that 85% of the seats are dominated by tribal, regional and independent candidates. This is no surprise because the election rules are created in the tribal figures favor, as is the case of the national parliament. In fact, in the parliamentary elections in 2016, it is reported that independents won 73% of the seats. In the context of the Jordanian election, independents are generally composed of conservative pro regime and tribal figures.

Some opposition figures choose to run as independents, but the number of such candidates is limited. Similarly, those candidates who are party affiliated are oppositional in general. There are some pro-regime conservative parties, but most of them are small, poorly organized and prone to dissolution soon after the election.

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To grasp the challenges of Jordan's decentralization reform further, this section also examines the situation of the governorate council. The governorate council has two main challenges. The first is the council's legal framework. As explained earlier, the governorate council is a newly created advisory council of the governorate. This reflects the decentralization law's aim to strengthen the representation of the population's will in the governorate level policies. However, there are significant legal limitations in the role of the council. All the council can do is to provide advice to the governorate administration, and it does not make policy decisions at the governorate. It seems to reflect a compromise between the old-school and the reform initiative. On the one hand, the establishment of the governorate council reflects the idea of decentralization to strengthen the input from the local populations, and the idea of planning development projects at the governorate level itself is a landmark for the local administration in Jordan. However historically, historically, the governorate has been tightly controlled by the governor, who is appointed by the Minister of Interior and is routinely shuffled to another Governorate.

Reflecting the Ministry of Interior's jurisdiction, one of the government's prominent roles has been the maintenance of public order. In the interviews with members of the various governorates' councils, the author found that almost all of them internalize the official explanations of the Council's role as an administrative advisory body rather than autonomous political decision maker. This sounds as if the council members are conservative and prone to maintaining the status quo and pro-regime figures, but they also share their views with the reformers, the neoliberal technocratic elites. They acknowledge the historical state dominance of resource distribution and the prevalence of clientelistic distribution in the country and argue that the country needs another mechanism that will promote the balanced distribution of

the resources to the citizens. However, as previously mentioned, their authority in decision making is restricted by the law which prevents them from pursuing this goal.

In addition to the legal challenges, they face practical and political challenges, as they lack negotiation power against the central government. Because the authority to give licenses and permissions is under the central ministries, the government has to negotiate with the ministers in implementing a project after decisions are made.

If the governorate were to be granted permissions in implementing a project, they could realize the project smoothly, which would be beneficial to the local population as the representative of the local population, and as a driver of decentralization. Decentralized governance negotiations with the central ministry have a lot to do with the governorate council's *raison d'être* and policy decisions. However, the problem is that the governor council members do not have enough experience or expertise, connections or resources, to smoothly negotiate with the ministers.

Furthermore, legislative power could be beneficial in the negotiations with the ministry, and this is a case for the members of the Parliament. In exchange for the cooperation on a specific issue of a ministry's administration concern, they could win concessions from them. However, in the case of governorate council members, they do not have such an authority that would be useful in negotiation with the ministry, which makes the negotiation harder than the case of parliamentarians.

The struggle for the governorate council members is not only limited to such administrative dimensions, as they are facing political challenges as well. Although they constitute what is officially considered as an administrative body, as I have mentioned, it represents the local population as well. The council members have an incentive to provide benefits to the constituencies to gain votes from them in the upcoming elections.

A member of a Governor's Council showed me a long list of the call history on his cell phone and told me that his phone number is open to anybody, and people do make phone calls to him at any time to ask him for help. He went on to say that responding to such requests for help is an essential part of his work as a member of the Governorate Council.

This means that structure of competitive clientelism, which was initially discussed at the level of national politics, has also been applied to sub-national politics. This predicts that the governing council members have both administrative and political functions, and, more importantly what people expect from the governorate council member is the distribution of state resources, as is the case of parliamentarians. Parliamentarians and local elected politicians are competing with each other in providing services to the constituencies.

Moreover, it seems that tribes or political parties do not function as a forum for cooperation among them, but are just competing with each other to provide resources. Accordingly, the Governorate Council is in a difficult situation both administratively and politically.

(2) Amendment to the Decentralization Law

The latter part of the analytical section looks at the discussion of the amendment to the decentralization law. At the same time as the implementation of the decentralization as per the law of 2015, people had already started to consider reforming it based on their experiences in the first phase of the project. The discussion has shown us how people consider the differences of decentralization and how people view relations between the center and local administrations and politics in this era.

The decentralization project in Jordan is implemented under the support of multiple international aid organizations. They provide active reviews and recommendations to the Jordanian government. In the

case of discussion of the amendment, a governmental advisory council named “Economic and Social Council (al-Majlis al-Iqtisadi wa-l-Ijtima‘i al-Urdunni),” and a domestic research institute named “Al-Quds Center for Political Studies (Markaz al-Quds lil-Dirasat al-Siyasiyya),” as well as international agencies, like the USAID and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung have provided recommendations.

In this chapter, I focus on the recommendations by the USAID CITIES project, which is working widely across the country, and has a significant influence on the government through their close cooperation with the ministries. “USAID CITIES” is a USAID-funded five-year project from 2016 for cities, and the name “CITIES” is the acronym of “cities implementing transparent, innovative, and effective solutions.”

It works with the Ministry of Parliament and Political affairs, the Minister of the Interior, and the Ministry of Local Administration, covering 33 municipalities and all of the 12 governorates. The project covers different sizes and locations of municipalities. According to their official document, their task is to support the development of more inclusive government operations.

In a report named “The National Dialogue for Decentralization,” a summary of the issues was prepared on May 23, 2019. The CITIES project provides an analysis of the current development of the decentralization project in Jordan and proposes recommendations for the amendment of the law (USAID CITIES, 2019).

According to the recommendations, what struck me the most was the proposal for reorganizing the Governorate Council. Instead of direct elections, the plan calls an indirect one when creating the governorate Council. Specifically, they propose that the governorate council be reorganized as an arena that gathers municipalities and local civil societies representatives.

The aim of this proposal is in their view, to reduce conflict in

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elections and promote cooperation in the local administrations. This view makes sense, but this proposal seems to reflect two additional issues.

The first is the prevalence of the deep-seated distrust for elections in the country. Generally speaking, abandoning the election process is a costly proposal because it denies the population the opportunity to show their potential will. Because this proposal was made at such a cost, it should be fair to expect the people's frustration at their inability in a conflict with the administration of the governorate council could exceed the prohibitive cost of losing their votes.

Secondly, that recommendation seems to reflect an adherence to the decentralization reforms facet of administrative reform. The proposal presupposed that the Governorate Council's had only a limited authority in policymaking and attempts to strengthen coordination in the Council within that framework.

Furthermore, two challenges are seen in the amendment proposal. First, the proposal does not touch upon the central control of local governments, including the central ministries supremacy on the government administration. I would argue that this reflects the structural hierarchy in the center-local regions in Jordan.

Secondly, the proposal does not consider the inherently political nature of policy making. The proposal regards the governance council as an administrative body, and its decision making is expected to be made in a fully technocratic way under the direction of the governorate. However, it is impossible to avoid any policy advisory judgment in policy discussions. Instead, it might be possible that people could perceive a policy under the governorates as potentially biased and begin to see the governorate as illegitimate for the population. In other words, a fundamental but direct election could deepen the cleavage between the local administration and the population. This could significantly reduce the ideal of decentralization.



Figure 5. Downtown Amman

Source: Getty Images

5. Conclusion

To summarize the discussion, let me revisit the research question: What effect does the transformation of the ruling coalition of the Jordanian regime from conservative to neoliberal one have on Jordanian politics?

This study examined the cases of decentralization from the perspective of multi-level governance. That is the interaction between the central and local administration and politics. The findings of this study are twofold. Firstly, the case of decentralization is an outcome of a successful compromise between the two groups within the ruling coalition.

TJ elites maintain their supremacy in access to the state through their dominance in the national and local equity councils. Besides, they hindered substantial transformation in the process of resource distribution at the local level. But at the same time, reformers are

happy, because the proposal for the reform was materialized as an internationally regarded reform without damaging the interest of the conservatives.

Simultaneously, the project of decentralization is well acknowledged in the international arena, which is vividly illustrated by the fact that various international aid organizations are committing to the project. Secondly, the process of decentralization reaffirms central control over the local society.

This is exemplified by the legal status and actual situation of the governmental council and the discussion over the amendment of the decentralization law. However, it would be too optimistic to say that the Jordanian government or general regime has successfully resolved the dilemmas of decentralization between the traditional conservative elites and neoliberal technocratic trends. It could be that such a defensive response has been achieved at the expense of local autonomy and local voices, and the substance of the idea of decentralization itself. This means that the legitimacy of the reform in the eyes of local population is fundamentally weak. We have yet to witness serious dissent from the local population to the development of decentralization reform at this time, but it could still happen considering the continuous demonstrations and riots in the rural areas since the beginning of labor reforms, which seem to be gaining strength in recent years.

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