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### **Jordan: A Balancing Act that Keeps Political Change at Bay**

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For the sixth time this year, Human Rights Watch is questioning Jordan's commitment to abolish provisions in its penal code used solely to silence opposition figures. In November, Adnan Abu Odeh, former head of the Royal Court was investigated for allegedly insulting the king and inciting sectarian strife during televised remarks. By voicing the widely held sentiment among Jordanians of Palestinian origin—half the country's population of 5.6 million—that they are excluded from full political life, the 73-year-old politician born in the West Bank city of Nablus touched a nerve. Charges against him were dropped quickly to minimize domestic polarization and preempt growing Western criticism over Jordan's teetering experiment with rule of law.

The Abu Odeh episode illustrates Jordan's halting trek towards democracy, based on an insecurity rooted largely in the continuing Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Debates continue to rage within Jordan about whether democratic reform would threaten stability as long as the regional crisis remains unresolved or, conversely, whether opening up the political system gradually is the only way to ensure long-term security. Since taking over in 1999, King Abdullah has shown more consistency on economic than political change, handpicking liberals and technocrats to implement market-oriented reforms while sticking to mostly center-right prime ministers to ensure that political opening is on a slower track.

As with most Arab states, Jordan replicates the pattern of episodically opening up and closing down political reform, often linking shifts to the Arab-Israeli conflict and its consequences for internal security. In the most recent installment of a long-running saga, Jordan rolled back political reform after Al Qaeda's suicide attacks against Amman hotels in November 2005. A new government led by a conservative army strategist turned diplomat replaced one led by self-styled liberal academic premier Adnan Badran, who had promised to promote political freedom during his six-month tenure. A “security package” of laws was passed by parliament

this summer at the prodding of the palace and the powerful intelligence apparatus, including anti-terror legislation that raised concerns about violations of free speech and civil liberties. Other laws nationalized the issuance of fatwas (religious edicts) and banned preachers from delivering sermons without prior approval. Such laws are seen as essential to curb religious fanaticism—fed by endemic corruption, poverty, unemployment, and discontent over the government's pro-U.S. policies—among Jordan's young and disillusioned population, but they also could backfire.

In July 2006 the National Agenda, a ten-year blueprint for reform crafted by a royal commission headed by liberal politician Marwan Muasher, was dealt a heavy blow after the agenda's plan to change the electoral law and introduce proportional representation was shelved. Over 700 hand-picked Jordanians representing all walks of life were invited by the palace to a closed-door meeting to forge a consensus on priorities for the next two years, including local and regional challenges. The carefully-worded "All for Jordan" document that emerged was laced with constructive ambiguity to appease the diverse needs of an entrenched bureaucracy, a conservative tribal parliament, powerful current and former officials struggling to maintain influence, a Westernized elite unhappy over the slow pace of reform, an influential Islamist-led opposition and Palestinian refugees still smarting over the 1994 peace treaty with Israel.

And so for now Jordan will keep the current one-person, one-vote electoral law, which favors the majority East Bank rural areas over densely populated cities with a majority Palestinian Jordanian population. Why address such a divisive issue, the government's thinking goes, when polls show that the majority of Jordanians favor the current election law until there is a full settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the fate of Palestinian refugees in Jordan is determined?

There is also increasing official talk in favor of postponing general parliamentary elections set for summer 2007, for up to two years, due to regional turbulence. Such a move would be motivated by fear that the influential Islamic Action Front might win a majority in parliament. Jordan's Islamists have long opposed the decision to sever links with the West Bank on the grounds that the territory is part of an Islamic waqf (endowment) and no-one has the right to give it up. They might use an election victory to forge closer links with Hamas and to push for setting up an Islamic state combining Jordan and whatever is left of the Palestinian territories.

Jordan and other Arab regimes are toeing an increasingly difficult line, apprehensive about their own restive publics, occasional Western pressure for reform, and most of all the prospect of losing power. This is pushing them toward caution. Jordan cannot postpone forever the issue of the political rights of second- and third-generation citizens of Palestinian origin. But for the present, political survival is the name of the game, especially when Jordanian leaders see election results in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon as having produced more turmoil than consensus.

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