“Do You Know Who Governs Us? The Damned Monetary Fund”

Jordan’s June 2018 Rising

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From May 30 to June 7, 2018 Jordanian protesters took the world by surprise. What had started as protests over a taxation draft law and an increase in gas prices quickly led to a popular rising against the neoliberal path on which the state has embarked. The rejection of neoliberal economic policy and the privatization of key national industries are not new to Jordan. But the centrality in which this analysis featured in the events of June’s rising (*habbit* [1] *huzayran*) is unprecedented. In the past, protests against the government’s economic *nahj* (path) were most strongly felt in workers’ circles, the governorates outside Amman and a few impoverished quarters inside the capital. This time, the coalition spread from the governorates to the heart of Amman, from the working classes to middle-income and high earners and from marginalized people to highly visible civil society organizations and activists, most notably women’s rights activists. Furthermore, liberal counter-narratives of advancing political awareness as opposed to what they see as simplistic “economic demands” have not been able to drown the voices of protesters and their central focus on opposing neoliberal economic policies.

The grievances that led Jordanians of so many different socioeconomic backgrounds to the streets are not unique to Jordan. Many countries of the global South have been forced to adopt austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to qualify for IMF and World Bank loans. Jordan’s June Rising should therefore be understood within the broader context of the anti-globalization movement in which hundreds of millions of people around the world are struggling to resist the economic policies that impoverish them personally and place their countries in subservient global power relations. More particularly, Jordan’s June 2018 rising was also an extension of the earlier Jordanian anti-austerity and IMF protests of 1989 and 1996 as well as the 2011–2012 protests. Protesters insisted that the only way to attain socioeconomic justice is by departing from the state’s chosen economic *nahj* (path) and fighting the reign of the IMF (*hukm al-sanduq*).

Taking on the IMF

Since early 2018, Jordanians have been fighting the latest wave of IMF–dictated austerity measures. Most prominently were the Salt protests that lasted for over a hundred days, and protests that followed in Dhiban and Karak. Despite the persistence of protestors in these governorates, however, demonstrations did not spread across the country or to Amman. This changed on May 21, 2018, when the Jordanian government released a new draft income tax law. While the government marketed the law as progressive, the law lowered the tax exemption cut-off rate from JD 24,000 to 16,000 per family per annum. For individuals, the rate for exemption was set at JD 666 ($938) a month. The draft law also no longer exempted up to JD 4,000 for children’s tuition fees; under the old law, families were eligible for tax exemptions up to JD 28,000. [2] While the new draft law suggested increasing the tax brackets from three to five, [3] in effect taxation increased on the lower and not higher earners: The first bracket was lowered from JD 22,000 to JD

13,000 per individual tax payer per annum, while the highest bracket of 25 percent is JD 33,000 per individual or JD 41,000 per family. This change means that an annual income of JD 33,000 is taxed the same percentage as one of JD 250,000 or even JD 20 million. Moreover, all businesses pay the same tax rate regardless of size or profit margin, and taxes were raised for some sectors. The agricultural sector, which was tax exempt under the old law, was required to pay up to 20 percent in taxes under the new law. Taxes on the industrial sector were increased from 14 to 20 percent, and banks were required to pay up to 40 percent. Although large parts of these sectors are owned by industrial magnates, they are also characterized by the concentration of national as opposed to global capital. More significantly, they employ large numbers of Jordanians; foreign investments, in contrast, are often tax-exempt. The dramatically increased taxes on these key enterprises was seen as a threat to future middle–class employment and wage levels.

In response, the Council of Professional Unions (*majlis al-naqabat al-mihaniya*) declared May 30 a day of general strike for all private and public sector employees and anyone affected by the government's policies. [4] Under the leadership of women's rights activists, civil society organizations released a declaration rejecting the income tax draft law and asking the government to withdraw it. [5] The declaration affirmed that taxation should be "truly progressive" and that an increase in taxes had to be coupled with improving services, especially providing adequate health and education services for all its citizens.

Thirty-three unions responded to the call to strike. [6] On May 30, doctors staged a general walkout of public hospitals and health centers, while continuing to provide emergency services. Entire markets were closed in Irbid and Amman, especially in Amman's downtown area. While banks did not officially participate in the strike, they encouraged their employees to strike by promising that they would not face disciplinary consequences. The organizers asked strikers to head to the professional unions complexes in their respective governorates at noon on May 30. While estimates vary, at least 3,000 protesters gathered at the syndicate building in Amman alone.

What is needed is an economic system that prioritizes the welfare of Jordanians instead of investors.

The union leadership demanded that the government withdraw the tax law draft, and that both the sales tax law and civil service law be revised. They demanded a progressive taxation system in which the rich are taxed higher percentages than the poor. Protesters also demanded that the state should address budget deficits not by taxing the poor, but by redressing tax evasions by big businesses and the tax exemption and evasion by multinational companies. Protesters called for lowering fuel and electricity prices and an end to corruption. They demanded the resignation of the government and the prime minister. They also called for the dissolution of lower house of parliament. Centrally, however, protesters affirmed that their demands went beyond the taxation law and the person of the prime minister, and that neoliberal economics in Jordan must change.

Cross-Class Unity

Protesters across Jordan condemned the economic reforms that Jordan has been following at the bequest of the IMF. Since the late 1980s, Jordan has signed numerous agreements with the IMF, most recently at the outset of Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki's tenure in 2016. The early 2000s saw the privatization of almost all national resources and

industries—from phosphate to electricity and telecommunication, [7] to selling off of Jordan's only port to pay off debts to the Paris Club. Protestors criticized the lack of transparency during privatization, in which companies were sold to unknown buyers. [8] Furthermore, most industries were sold far below their market value, with some even being handed over for less than their yearly profit margin. [9] Privatization thus deprived the country of both its primary sources of income and its financial independence, making the government even more dependent on aid rent and taxation. IMF recommendations also led to the erosion of subsidies, welfare policies and state services. Extra taxes were imposed on fuel, which increased by as much as 48 percent. Earlier in 2018, the government had raised the sales tax of 164 basic products (including dairy products, fruits and vegetables) to ten percent. Bread prices doubled, and fuel prices were increased five times. Finally, electricity prices climbed 55 percent since January 2018.

The latest protests saw a large number of middle-class protesters and the participation of civil society and women's rights organizations. Compared to previous events organized by the union council, female and male Islamists—who had lost elections in the influential engineering syndicate a month earlier—notably were absent. Most protesters in Amman and Irbid during the first days of the strike were white-collar workers and middle-class professionals. They were joined by some relatively high earners. For many, the strike was their first experience participating in a protest. [10] Lawyers arrived in their robes, engineers wearing work helmets. More than half of the protesters were women, with women's rights organizations participating. Women's rights activists joined both the strike and subsequent protests. In Irbid, female protesters led and invented chants that addressed women in particular.

While the June protests have been both celebrated and critiqued for their middle-class nature, two issues bear emphasizing. First, while middle class protesters joined the strikes and protests in unprecedented numbers at Amman's professional associations complex and the Fourth Circle (where the office of the prime minister is located), working-class protesters were a substantial portion of the crowds. In areas such as East Amman's Hayy al-Tafayla neighborhood and in the governorates, working-class protesters comprised the majority. [11]

Second, the term middle class (*al-ṭabaqa al-wusta*) in Jordan, as in much of the global South, does not necessarily denote someone who is financially secure. As of 2017, Jordan ranks sixty-fifth globally in monthly salaries, averaging JD 450 (US $637)—well below the poverty line [12] of JD 813.7 per individual. [13] Low salaries are not offset by low cost of living. On the contrary, *The Economist* has declared Amman the second most expensive city in the Middle East. [14] In Jordan as elsewhere, the middle classes live in precarity, and austerity measures threaten to sink them into poverty.

The Nightly Fourth Circle Protests

On the second day of protests, Jordanians woke to the news that the government had increased gas prices a second month in a row. [15] Many Jordanians regarded this increase as the government signaling complete disregard for popular demands. In protest, Jordanians began gathering at the Fourth Circle near the prime minister's office that evening following Tarawih (Ramadan) prayers. [16] Working-class activists initially had criticized the May 30 strike as benefiting the middle classes and had urged blue-collar workers to refrain from participating. [17] But with the gas price increase, the government drove working class Jordanians to join the protests the following day. [18]

On the morning of June 1, Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki froze the increase of gas prices at the bequest of King ‘Abdallah II. This move, however, did not bring the protests to an end. In Amman, growing crowds attempted to reach the Fourth Circle, and this time the Darak gendarmerie forces prevented protesters from reaching the site. Protests erupted all over Jordan, and some protesters burned tires and closed off roads, notably in Irbid, Jarash and Madaba. [19] On the whole, however, protesters were careful to signify the peaceful nature of their demonstrations. [20] At the Fourth Circle, they picked up garbage before returning home in the early hours of the morning. Protesters also sang patriotic anthems and asked the Darak forces to join them in singing and sharing their pre-fasting meals (*suhur*).

The number of female protesters at the Fourth Circle and at the Irbid union protests was high. In Zarqa and Irbid, women led chants. Female activists tweeted slogans specifically targeting women. Activist Ayesha al-Omary countered androcentric nationalist language and connected gender to class [21] in a tweet in colloquial Arabic which read: “You [women] who are sitting inside the home. Nashmiyyat [Jordanian women patriots] should be at the [Fourth] circle. Come out oh daughter of my uncle. The place of Jordanian women is in the heart of the revolution. We are not the sisters of men. Men are our brothers. See you today. Your role is as important as your brothers.” [22]

With the exception of Ru’ya Internet TV, official media outlets remained silent. Protesters streamed live recordings of the protests on Facebook and Twitter. After a period of relative inactivity since 2016, al-Hirak al-Shababi al-Urduni (The Jordanian Youth Movement), one of the youth coalitions that formed during the 2011–2012 protests, started reporting on strike-related events through its Facebook page. Another Facebook group, Ma3nash (We have Nothing), reported on events and tweeted slogans. 7iber, an internet-based critical media outlet, compiled daily reports not just from the Fourth Circle, but also from the Hayy al-Tafayla neighborhood in East Amman as well as from Irbid, Madaba, Zarqa and other cities. WhatsApp group members kept each other informed throughout the night, forwarding videos of events and speculating on the reaction of the government and the monarchy.

It was not until the evening of June 2 that the king responded. Upon returning to Jordan from a visit abroad, the king called for national dialogue. Despite rumors of the prime minister’s resignation, al-Mulki did not submit his resignation until the afternoon of June 4. [23] Omar al-Razzaz, a former minister of education and World Bank official, was named the new prime minister.

Protests continued until the evening of June 6, affirming that the problem was not the person of the prime minister but economic policies pursued by the regime. On June 7, al-Razzaz announced that his government would withdraw the draft tax law and engage in a national dialogue to ensure that the next law would not fall on the shoulders of the poor. On June 7, the roads to the Fourth Circle were reopen, with youth activists celebrating their victory with pastries (*kinafa*) and fireworks in empty parking lots.

While al-Razzaz is greatly respected among liberal civil society activists and the middle- and upper-middle classes, his history with the World Bank suggests that he is unlikely to break with Jordan’s neoliberal economic path. If the Strategy Forum—one of his initiatives before becoming minister—is any indication, he does not take the interests of large industries lightly. [24] More importantly, the power of the prime minister in Jordan is limited

in the current political structures, so al-Razzaz may well be unable to move against IMF–imposed policies, even if he wanted to.

The Possibility of Resisting Neoliberalism

Popular resistance against detrimental economic policies has a long history in Jordan, from the National Conference of 1928, to the Jordanian National Movement of the 1950s, to the April 1989 protests and most recently the protests in Jordan in 2011and 2012 during the Arab uprisings. At each of those junctures, the regime has responded to protests with a liberal discourse that separates politics from economics, emphasizing political or legal solutions in isolation of structural economic transformation. The most notorious example is Jordan's so-called democratization that took place following the 1989 protests against price increases and lifted subsidies. In response to popular demands for economic rights and the right to economic self-determination, the regime gave them limited political rights through which they were unable to achieve these economic rights. Moreover, since 1989 a local discourse has emerged that considers economic demands as somehow less sophisticated than making political demands such as the reformation of the lower chamber of parliament. [25]

What distinguished the June protests from earlier protests was the diverse composition of the participants not only geographically, but also in terms of class and gender. No leadership emerged; no group spoke for others or dominated the discussion. When the head unionist called for an end of the protests a week into them, he was booed down by the crowd. Protesters also resisted any attempts to divide them along lines of origin (e.g., whether someone is a Palestinian–Jordanian or a Jordanian–Jordanian). On the second day of protest, a message was widely shared on social media that read:

Dear Jordanian,

If within the next week any of the following happens, know that the government wants to distract you:

1) Jordanian vs. Palestinian / Faisali vs. Wihdat [26] / Northerner vs. Southerner.
2) Muslim Brotherhood and political parties, or any other stories, be careful.
3) Foreign agendas.
4) A successful crackdown on a potential terrorist attack / safety and security.
5) Bank robbery.
6) That we fasted on the wrong day this year.

Given how often the regime had used the divide-and-conquer policy successfully in the past, the consolidation of protesters across lines of class and place of origin was impressive. In the Hirak movement of 2011–2012, protesters fought identity politics by organizing around a wider class identity, regarding themselves as children of tillers (*awlad al-harathin*). This time, however, protesters came from different class backgrounds. Yet, the potential tax reforms, coupled with years of economic hardship and unemployment, showed the middle classes that they were not safe and gave them a taste of the precarious conditions under which most Jordanians have been suffering for decades.

Compared to the 2011–2012 protests, the message of the June rising is harder to place within a liberal trajectory, as it was clearly directed against the neoliberal economic path followed by the regime since 2000. The popular movement of 2011–2012 also primarily resisted neoliberal policies, but the voices of the protesters demanding economic reform were often drowned out by discourses of liberal political reform. [27]

Hearing the Street

The slogans of the June protests show that protesters placed the blame on the economic structure as a whole; in some earlier protests, they also blamed the lower house and the government for corruption. To avoid any confusion (or efforts to twist the meanings), slogans made it clear that protesters were calling for the fall of the government because of its "policy of impoverishment." One chant, for example, was "Fall, fall, Hani al-Mulki, and may the government of impoverishment fall." Government here did not refer only to the Mulki cabinet. Similarly, slogans—"Oh Shame, oh shame, they have sold Jordan for dollars" and "Oh, you Government of Shame. Shame on You. [You] have sold the land and sold the house"—focus the critique of the government (and the political structures supporting it) primarily concern how privatization and the path or rule (*nahj*/*hukm*) of the dollar guide government actors, when it should be the welfare of citizens.

Indeed, most slogans criticized neoliberal economic policies as serving the interests of big companies to the detriment to the welfare of the Jordanian people, and as placing Jordan and its people in subservient positions to international power relations. Among the most prominent chants were: "Against poverty and against hunger, and against the reasons that make us kneel," and "Do you know who governs us? The damned Monetary Fund. Take your money and leave us alone." Furthermore, protesters were not chanted against individual corruption, in the liberal sense, but against what they saw as structural corruption: "Oh Shame, oh Shame, they have sold Jordan for dollars." In other words, protesters regarded neoliberalism itself as inherently corrupt, justifying giving millions to investors in tax exemptions and making the poor pay the costs: "We are not poor but were made poor, this is your policy, oh dollar" (*Mish faqir lakin ifqar, hatha nahjak ya dular*). This understanding of corruption is in stark contrast to notions of corruption which depict the main problem of postcolonial states in the global South as one of corrupt individuals, rather than global economic structures that keep elites, leaders and policies which harm their populations. Framed this way, the problem is mismanagement rather than (deliberate) structures that benefit the elite at the expense of the majority. At the June rising, protesters explicitly rejected the logic of granting multinational corporations tax exemption in order to increase investment, or that exempting the poor from taxes would amount to unfair state interference. They rejected the neoliberal logic that regards any investment in the welfare of the population as constituting economically ineffective subsidies.

Any meaningful government response to the June protests must be about more than reform. The problem is not that of "bad" economics, or of economics done badly, as one blogger suggested. [28] Nor is the solution to hire highly educated "experts" to provide a path for reform. Because the economic system works perfectly well for those it aims to enrich, it needs more than reform. What is needed is an economic system that prioritizes the welfare of Jordanians instead of investors. This requires investment in an economically independent welfare state.

Endnotes

1. In Jordanian dialect, the singular is *habeh*, which more precisely means "outburst." In the context of the protests, the term carried a meaning closer to "rising."

2. Feminists have criticized the law for privileging men by allowing husbands to claim these tax exceptions rather than their wives.
3. The previous law had three JD 10,000 tax brackets. In the draft law, a taxpayer would move up a bracket after each additional JD 5,000 earned.
4. "Al-Naqabat, almuhnya tad`u kafat muntasbiha li al-idrab youm al-arbi`a' ihtajajan 'ala ta`dilat al-darabia," *al-Saraya News*, May 26, 2018.
5. "Muw'assasat a-mujtma` al-madani ta`lan al-adarab," *Sawalif*, May 29, 2018.
6. "Al-Naqabat al-mihniyya fi al-urdan taḍrab 'an al-`amal rafdan li-qanun dariybat al-dakhl," *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, May 30, 2018.
7. The plans to privatize telecommunication started in the second half of the 1990s and were executed in the 2000s.
8. A company by the name of Kamil Holding ended up buying the phosphate company. Initially rumors suggested that the owner was the Sultan of Brunei, who denied any connection. Jordanians still do not know who owns Kamil Holding.
9. Retired Military Veterans, "al-Wataniyya al-u'liyya lil-mutaqaideen al-a'sariyeen takshif a'n shubuhat fasad al-khaskhasa," *Ammannet*, January 24, 2011.
10. Rula Hroub, "Hal al-hikrak al-urduni iqisadi faqat? In i'u'bat al-ummam," *Al Mayadeen*, June 6, 2018.
11. Du`aa al-`Ali and Shakir Jarrar, "Al-'Ihtijaj al-hadari wa istithna' al-muhafahdat," 7iber, July 10, 2018.
12. Omar Obeidat, "Third of Jordan's population lives below poverty line at some point of one year," *The Jordan Times*, July 2, 2014.
13. Laila Azzeh, "Kingdom's average monthly salary stands at $637 – report," *The Jordan Times*, April 7, 2017.
14. The Data Team, "Asian and European Cities Compete for the Title of Most Expensive City," *The Economist*, March 15, 2018.
15. Riham Zayydan, "Al-H'ukuma tarfa' Asa'ar al-Mahroukat min 4.8 ila 5.5%," *Al Ghad*, May 31, 2018.
16. Mohammad al Irsan, "Al-urdun 'ala safeeh sakhen, riyah al-'ihtijaj ahub fi kul makan," *Arabi 21*, June 1, 2018.
17. Du`a' al-`Ali and Shakir Jarrar, "Jordan's Strike and Uprising: No Alternative to Alliances from Below,"7iber, Translated by Siwar Masannat. June 3, 2018.
18. Curtis Ryan, "Why Jordanians are Protesting," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2018.
19. For a critique of the classist analysis of the peaceful nature of the protests, see Du`a' al-`Ali and Shakir Jarrar, "Al-'Ihtijaj al-h'adari wa istithna' al-muhafadat," 7iber, June 10, 2018.
20. After international media started paying attention to the protests around the fourth day, the regime was eager to appear tempered and benevolent in its response. The state's response to protestors in Amman differed greatly, however, from its response to protesters in the southern city of Tafila. Social media activists in Tafila joke that the Darak forces offered protesters water after tear gassing them with expired ammunition.
21. In another tweet al-Omary referred to women as the daughters of [female] farmers and the daughters of Akoub harvesters in reference to both Jordanian-Jordanian and Palestinian-Jordanian women of peasant backgrounds. @AyeshaOmary, June 1, 2018.
22. @AyeshaOmary, June 1, 2018.

23. Al-Mulki initially claimed that Jordan's commitment to the IMF did not allow the government to withdraw the draft tax law.
24. Salma al-Nims, personal conversation with the author, June 7, 2018.
25. For an example of an analysis that prioritizes so-called political reform see : Hisham Bustani, "La'hdat al-tagheer al-hasima, kayfa nu'awel 'ihijajat 'idrab al-urdun' ila makaseb sh'abiyya?" 7iber, June 4, 2018.
26. Al-Faysali and al-Wihdat, the two main football teams in Jordan, are generally supported by Jordanian–Jordanians and Palestinian–Jordanians, respectively.
27. This is not to say that no one suggested political solutions to the uprising. Former foreign minister Marwan al-Mua'sher and researcher Mohammad Abu Rumman both have argued that political disenfranchisement is the main problem which Jordanians face. These accounts, however, are a continuation of the writers' previous ideas and do not build directly on the demands of the street. From Marwan al-Mu'asher, see "La dara'ib duna tamtheel," *al-Ghad*, May 30, 2018 and "Hal n'amal fi tagheer nahj?" *al-Ghad*, June 6, 2018; from Mohammad Abu Rumman, see "Mufaraqat al-duwar al-rabe`," *al-Ghad*, June 4, 2018; "'Andama yaksab al-jamee`," *al-Ghad*, June 5, 2018;"Al-ibiad 'an 'hafat al-hawiyya," *al-Ghad*, June 7, 2018; and "Manifesto al-shabab al-urduni," *al-Ghad*, June 8, 2018.
28. Nasim al-Tarawneh, "Jordan's Gabba3at Moment, Protests, Strikes, How We Got Here And Where We're Going," The Black Iris, June 4, 2018.

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