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Jordan Royal Discussion Paper I: Our Journey to Forge Our Path towards Democracy King Abdullah II

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

Note: Responding to popular demands within the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for political reforms King Abdullah II has announced a series of Royal Discussion Papers outlining his vision. The first in the series was published on 29 December 2012 and was followed by two other Discussion Papers on 16 January and 3 March 2013. The first two were published before the parliament elections held on 22 January 2013. Given the importance of these Royal Documents, the MEI@ND is publishing them for wider dissemination and deliberations. Next two Papers would be published on Tuesday and Wednesday. **Editor, MEI@MD.**

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The Coming Campaign

National lists and candidates across the country have begun their election campaigns for the next Parliament, launching an intense, short election period, in which every day matters, and every citizen matters, because it is your active participation, as citizens, that will breathe life into our democracy.

Candidates are not running for the right to sit in Parliament in Amman and earn personal benefits. They are running to be given a responsibility and a privilege: the national duty of making key choices on some of the most important decisions facing our country, decisions that will impact the future of every Jordanian.

My goal and responsibility within this national course is to encourage debate about our progress as a nation in democratic development. This paper is part of efforts towards that goal. Today, and

in a series of other discussion papers in the next few months, I seek to stimulate debate among citizens about the most important issues we face as a country. A few weeks ago, in an interview with *Al-Rai* and *The Jordan Times* newspapers, I outlined in detail my vision for Jordan's democratic future and the roadmap to get there. Today, I dedicate this paper to share my vision for the principles and values needed to help us progress in our democratization journey, under our constitutional monarchy.

Now is the time for us to move actively towards key, practical milestones in that journey towards democracy. This election is one of those critical steps and a station on the political reform roadmap. As candidates come to your neighbourhoods over the next several weeks, they will be seeking to win your trust and your vote. But what they need to realize is that they must maintain your trust and honour your vote over the years to come. You have the right and the responsibility, and more importantly a national duty, to engage them in discussion on key issues related to the economy, the country's reform course and your vision for the future of our beloved Jordan.

It is equally important that you not only engage the candidates, but engage each other, as citizens, on all issues of priority without restrictions – at home, in coffee shops and community halls, in all gatherings and venues. To make democracy work, it is critical that we debate, discuss, and vote on the basis of the positions put forward by the candidates on key issues facing our country, and not on the basis of personalities or affinities related to geography or family.

As groups of citizens – whether in the form of political parties or community groups – we need to embrace political life as a fair and noble competition to generate the best ideas and solutions. No individual or group will get everything it wants. We must strike compromises in order to make the best possible choices in the interest of all Jordanians. The true and decisive test for our nation and our democratization journey is our ability to triumph together as one family in the face of the challenges that come before us.

Many times – in Jordan as around the world – disagreement, whether personal or political, expresses itself ineffectively in political intransigence, violence, or boycotts, which do not necessarily deliver desired goals. When this happens, it represents a temporary breakdown in democratic practices. This deprives our society of the chance to achieve compromise and consensus, resulting in a setback from which everyone then needs to recover. Democratic practice requires constructive engagement and acceptance of diversity of opinion.

Creating the right combination of tolerant debate, respectful competition, and informed choice-making is the key foundation of a democratic system, and is essential to moving our country forward into a brighter future all Jordanians deserve.

Our vision for the type of system we are seeking to build is clear, as is the path we need to take. But the journey will be long, there are no shortcuts, and it will not be easy because it requires changing some of our most fundamental practices, chief among them are the way we disagree with each other in the public sphere, and the way we make decisions on the national level.

The ideas outlined above require discussing a set of principles that are essential to developing the right practices for democracy. What we all need to develop, starting with the launch of this new election campaign, are the practices of good citizenship that are the foundations for a vibrant and effective democracy, and to work sincerely to guarantee that these practices become our *modus vivendi*.

I believe that there are four practices we must each embrace as citizens to help build our democratic system. While we should start adopting these practices as of this election campaign, that is only the beginning. We will continue to practice and develop these principles in our daily lives over the years to come, because these practices are the *sine qua nons* for democracy:

I. Respect for All Fellow Citizens is the Essence of Our Unity:

We need to acknowledge that as Jordanians we are all fellow travellers in the journey ahead, regardless of family, neighbourhood, gender or religious belief. We should engrave in our minds the unshakable fact that our unity and faith in this country transcends all differences. We must expand our circle of trust and respect, and build an inseparable bond between us to treat all fellow Jordanians with civility and dignity, irrespective of whether we know them well or not and whether we like them or not.

Respect in the public sphere means that we focus on issues, not personalities, and listen as intently as we talk. We all need to realize that understanding the opinion of others is the most crucial act of respect. There is no such thing as ‘free speech’ unless we listen. This is how we leave behind ‘Us versus Them’ ways of thinking, for at the end of the day we are all Jordanians and we are all for Jordan.

II. Citizenship and Accountability Go Hand in Hand:

I call on all fellow citizens to actively engage in important decisions and problem-solving activities of our society, such as reducing poverty and unemployment, continuously enhancing healthcare and education, improving public transport, overcoming the increasing cost of living, and fighting corruption and any waste of public funds. This starts now, by making our voices heard in the election campaigns and by voting on Election Day. But democracy is much more than voting, and does not end with casting our ballots. It is an on-going process; it is about holding our elected officials to their commitments and remaining continuously engaged in

the discussions and debates on the issues facing our families, our communities and our nation. This is why candidates must propose practical, objective and fact-based programs that provide implementable solutions to our challenges, rather than just theoretical slogans and over-diagnosis of our problems. As citizens, I call on you to uphold practices that will keep our society engaged and vibrant. Engaged citizens follow the news in newspapers, online, and on radio and TV. They write letters to the editors of their newspapers or to their Members of Parliament. They join community groups to organize community action about local issues and problems such as playgrounds, traffic safety, rubbish collection, water and sewage networks, and maintenance of roads and infrastructure.

III. Harnessing Disagreement into Compromise While Maintaining Constant Dialogue

It is important to combine the communication of our own opinions to others with a commitment to disagreeing respectfully with others, as we seek compromise solutions. The diversity of opinion, belief, and culture that exists in Jordan is our fundamental strength, not weakness.

Disagreement is not a sign of trouble or disloyalty. Respectful disagreement is the basis for dialogue, and dialogue over diverse ideas is the essence of democracy, and democracy is what makes compromise and agreement possible and will enable our nation to move forward.

Compromise means give and take, it means we do not get everything we want, nor does anyone else. The ability to compromise is a virtue. It is not a sign of personal weakness or humiliation. The best and most virtuous citizens among us are those who are willing to accept personal sacrifice in the interest of the nation as a whole, and this is why those who put their country first will remain forever engraved in our hearts and minds.

It is equally important that we commit to one another to resolving differences of opinion through debate and dialogue, long before engaging in protest or withdrawing from the discussion and taking to the streets.

While strikes and protests are constitutionally protected inalienable rights, they are extreme measures that should be tools of last, not first, resort. And let's all remember that once the boycott or strike is over, we will still have to work together to reach agreement and proceed hand in hand to forge our shared destiny.

Democracy means unequivocally rejecting violence or threats of violence, including intimidation and destruction of property. These are not acceptable forms of expression. They are not negotiation tactics. Violence is out of bounds.

IV. Shared Gains and Sacrifices:

We have to be patient in our understanding that democracy means that there are no permanent winners or losers and no permanent answers. We have to constantly adapt to changing circumstances. Throughout its history, our nation has demonstrated an ability to be agile, accommodate change and adapt as our circumstances require. We all gain from continuing to engage with one another, and continuously striving to move our country further along our development path, armed with the firm belief that we are all partners, both in gains and sacrifices.

What I have proposed so far are necessary practices that are crucial for a country seeking democratization, but it also begs the question: How will we measure progress?

As electoral campaigns go on, and through each year of our continuing democratic development after the election, we will know we are on the right path, because we will see ourselves getting better and better at these practices:

- A shared sense of dignity and pride in what we are doing together as a nation;
- A sense of achievement in overcoming the challenges and hurdles we confront together, through shared commitment and shared sacrifice, on our path to prosperity and greater security through a stronger democracy;
- Active engagement in shaping the future of Jordan through voting in elections – a commitment to democracy as a national paradigm and a way of life;
- Fruitful and respectful debates and discussions taking place in person and online;
- Civility between citizens characterized by a strong volunteering culture and growing generosity and trust to, and from, people we do not personally know.

It is well evident for all that we have embarked on a new and exciting chapter in our nation's development at a time of historic challenges. Moreover, we are passing through a decisive juncture, full of challenges and opportunities, and I remain a firm believer in the ability of Jordanians to overcome challenges and seize opportunities. I look forward to hearing the views and positions of all candidates running in this election. The responsibility assumed by those elected to the new Parliament on behalf of all citizens is enormous.

By exercising the practices of good democratic citizenship outlined above, Jordanians are all encouraged to seize the rights granted to them under the Constitution to fully exercise their responsibility to elect a competent new Parliament in the best interest of the nation's future and

take part in expressing the will of the people, for they have earned their rightful status as true partners in decision making. Now is the time we must each take responsibility for creating the future we want for all Jordanians by making democracy a way of life.

Source: Home page of King Abdullah II of Jordan,
http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/pages/view/id/247.html

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