

**Bartosz Wróblewski<sup>1</sup>**

## **Controlled Parliamentarism. Political and Constitutional Transformations in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1989–1999**

**Keywords:** the Hashemites, Jordan, Chamber of Deputies, election, Muslim Brotherhood  
**Słowa kluczowe:** Haszymidzi, Jordania, Izba Deputowanych, wybory, Bractwo Muzułmańskie

### **Abstract**

Under the pressure of social protests in 1989 in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, King Hussein I announced free elections. There was a revival of the system of constitutional monarchy, with a theoretically strong position of the Chamber of Deputies. Then, in 1989–1999 there was a struggle between the opposition and the monarch, who strived to maintain all real power. After 1989 the opposition was represented mainly by Islamic fundamentalists from the Muslim Brotherhood. King Hussein I managed to win the political struggle by using the tribal character of the society. The monarch maintained complete control over political processes, and the ideological opposition, both Islamic and leftist, was marginalized. However, thanks to that, the monarchy recognized real opposition, the multi-party system, and the freedom of speech. Thus, on the one hand, Jordan after 1989 has become one of the most liberal Arab states, but on the other hand, the monarch controls the parliament and the government

---

<sup>1</sup> ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4436-8221, Assoc. Prof, Department of International Relations and Human Rights, Institute of Political Science, College of Social Sciences, University of Rzeszów. E-mail: bwrob@o2.pl.

**Streszczenie****Kontrolowany parlamentaryzm. Przemiany polityczne i konstytucyjne w Jordańskim Królestwie Haszymidzkim w latach 1989–1999**

W Haszymidzkim Królestwie Jordanii w 1989 r. pod naciskiem protestów społecznych król Husajn I rozpiął wolne wybory. Nastąpił powrót do systemu monarchii konstytucyjnej teoretycznie z silną pozycją Izby Deputowanych. Następnie w latach 1989–1999 doszło do rywalizacji między starającym się zachować pełną władzę realną monarchą a opozycją. Opozycję po 1989 r. reprezentowali głównie fundamentaliści islamscy z Bractwa Muzułmańskiego. Król Husajn I wykorzystując specyfikę plemiennego społeczeństwa zdołał wygrać tę rozgrywkę polityczną. Monarcha zachował pełną kontrolę nad procesem politycznym, a ideowa opozycja tak islamistyczna, jak i lewicowa została zepchnięta na margines. Dzięki temu jednak monarchia zaakceptowała istnienie realnej opozycji, system wielopartyjny i znaczną wolność słowa. Z jednej strony więc Jordania po 1989 r. stała się jednym z najbardziej liberalnych państw arabskich, z drugiej monarcha w pełni kontroluje parlament i rząd.

✱

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is, formally, a constitutional monarchy. The fundamental law was granted to the state already in 1928 by the first ruler, Abd Allah I. During his reign, the royal authority was absolutist, also from a legal perspective. However, after he was assassinated in 1951, a new constitution was created. The fundamental law that was legislated in 1953 established the system of constitutional monarchy. The multi-party system was legislated, and the government was to be approved by the Chamber of Deputies. Formally, this constitution is still valid.

According to legal norms, since 1953, Jordan was supposed to be a constitutional monarchy with a strong position of the King as the executive authority leader but counterbalanced by the vast power of the parliament. Additionally, the dominant Chamber of Deputies was to be elected in entirely free, multi-party elections, while the King was to nominate the upper Chamber. The lawmakers followed the British model. However, the problem was that this model did not work in reality. An attempt to implement parliamen-

tarism in the Kingdom was undertaken in 1954–1957; however, it failed. The monarch and the court turned out not to be willing to accept the dominant role of the Chamber of Deputies.

On the other hand, the free election of 1956 was won by the representatives of the socialist opposition. This group acknowledged the idea of abolishing the monarchy. It comes as no surprise that the government formed at that time was conflicted with young King Hussein I and his supporters. Eventually, in 1957 the King dissolved the Chamber and assumed absolute power by introducing the state of emergency. The multi-party system was abolished<sup>2</sup>.

Within the next thirty years King Hussein I held, in fact, absolute power. Until the defeat in 1967, Jordan still had the parliament, and elections continued to be held. The Chamber of Deputies comprised of individually elected representatives of the opposition. However, the parliament ceased to counterbalance in any way the power of the monarch. After the defeat in the war against Israel, the parliament ceased to function. There was no election as there was a state of war against Israel. Half of the MPs were supposed to come from the West Bank, but due to the Israeli occupation, no elections were held there. Thus, theoretically, the MPs who had been elected before the war maintained their mandates, but meetings of the Chamber were not held. This situation continued until the mid-80s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>.

In 1989, internal affairs forced Hussein I to announce free elections. It was the second attempt to compromise the monarchy of the House of Hashemite with the parliamentary system. The following text discusses the efforts to establish a strong parliament in Jordan that have been made since 1989 and the decisions of the court that attempted to keep the dominant role in the political system. A critical period in the following text are the years between 1989 and 1999.

The results of the Jordan experiment are difficult to assess in absolute terms. The Hashemite state has become one of the most liberal ones in the Arab world. However, the systematic activity of the King led to the situation that the parliament, despite stipulations in the constitution, has not become an independent legislative power.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ph. Robins, *A History of Jordan*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 77, 80–82, 95–96; J. Lunt, *The Arab Legion*, London 1999, pp. 158, 160–161.

<sup>3</sup> B. Wróblewski, *Jordania*, Warsaw 2011, pp. 148, 168.

The following text is based mainly on English language materials concerning the history and contemporary situation of Jordan. Thankfully, the materials are numerous and accurate, which is to be owed to over 100-year-old relations of Amman with the Western world. The article follows the chronological order, which seems most appropriate for presenting the transformations in Jordan.

### **I. Jordan at Historic Crossroads 1989–1991**

After the defeat in the war against Israel in 1967, the Jordan monarchy underwent a serious crisis, which resulted in a civil war between Palestinian troops and the state army by the end of 1970. The victory of the Hashemite forces stabilized the country, but it also consolidated the model of an authoritarian monarchy. Simultaneously, in the 1970s, there began a period of the excellent economic outlook. Jordan directly benefited from the oil prosperity of the Gulf States, and money flowed there thanks to the work of hundreds of thousands of Jordan citizens in oil monarchies. Amman also benefited from western loans<sup>4</sup>. However, in the 1980s, the oil boom ended, and the Cold War coming to an end after 1985 caused that the West ceased to give generous loans for political loyalty. Jordan got into a spiral of debts and was forced to accept an austerity programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund<sup>5</sup>.

In 1989 budget cuts were introduced. Donations for food and fuel were reduced; this caused a rapid increase in the prices of fuel and basic necessities. At the same time, the government attempted to keep a ban on the increases in prices; for example, taxi rate changes were prohibited. On April 18, 1989, in Ma'an, taxi drivers began to protest, but soon they were joined by thousands of dissatisfied. The brutality of the government forces caused the protests to transform into violent riots. Within several days spontaneous riots spread throughout the cities in the south of the country, like Ma'an, Karak, Tafila, and Salt. It is noteworthy that the population in the south of Jordan was regarded as devoted to the monarchy. The Bedouin community dominated it. In 1989, they were no longer nomads, but even the inhabitants of cities

---

<sup>4</sup> A. Georg, *Jordan. Living in The Crossfire*, London–New York 2005, pp. 32–33.

<sup>5</sup> K. Salibi, *The Modern History of Jordan*, London–New York 1993, pp. 47–48.

remained the awareness of tribal identity. In 1957, the support of the people from this region enabled the Hashemite to survive; also, in 1970, the Palestinians were defeated by army troops dominated by people from the south. That is why violent riots in this region were particularly dangerous to the authorities<sup>6</sup>.

King Hussein I, a gifted demagogue who could sense social attitudes, knew that small concessions could not overcome the crisis. It was still during the riots when he announced profound changes and a return to the parliamentary system. The election was announced, and it was held on November 8, 1989. It was the first completely free election since 1956, but it had certain limitations. The ban on forming political parties was still in force; however, the freedom of political agitation was provided, so this ban did not limit the opposition. In order to run the election, the structure of the Chamber of Deputies was changed. Between 1954 and 1988, it consisted of 30 representatives of the area on the east of the Jordan river and 30 representatives from Palestine. In 1988 King Hussein officially forwent the supremacy over the West Bank. Thus, since then, the elections were to cover only the areas on the east of the Jordan, and the number of deputies was increased to 80<sup>7</sup>.

The elections brought forth a significant result. The Muslim Brotherhood gained twenty-two seats. Moreover, twelve other deputies represented views similar to those of the Islamic fundamentalists. Seven of the elected representatives were Arabic socialists, and four of them were communists. Twenty-two of the deputies, on the other hand, represented the interests of the southern tribes. The remaining thirteen deputies were independent, or they either represented local interests or did not have specified views. The court could expect to gain the support of the two latter groups, while the Islamic fundamentalists and the left were the opposition. Fortunately for the Hashemite, they were antagonistic toward each other<sup>8</sup>.

The role of the Muslim Brotherhood needs to be emphasized herein. It is a vast Sunni socio-political organization established in Egypt in the 1920s. It operates in the whole Islamic world by establishing numerous affiliated organizations. The Brotherhood is, without saying, a fundamentalist organi-

---

<sup>6</sup> Ph. Robins, *op.cit.*, pp. 167–170.

<sup>7</sup> B. Milton-Edwards, P. Hinchcliffe, *Jordan, A Hashemite Legacy*, London–New York 2009, pp. 47–48.

<sup>8</sup> Ph. Robins, *op.cit.*, pp. 171–172.

zation, which aims to revive the unity and power of the Muslim community by reverting to the Islamic law and lifestyle. The organization is opportunistic in appearing both as an apolitical or charitable movement and a typical political force. In Jordan, it has functioned since the forties. Since 1957 the Brotherhood supported King Hussein I and the authorities also completely tolerated it. The Brotherhood was a social association, but its political views also gained significant support. It must be emphasized that in contrast to the radical Jihadists, the Brotherhood was always oriented to legal and long-term activity. However, it has an ambiguous attitude toward the issue of violence<sup>9</sup>.

In the new parliament, the government was met with strong opposition. It was, however, the external events that threatened the stability of the state. On August 2, 1990, the army of Iraq seized Kuwait. For many reasons, Hussein, the King of Jordan, kept good relations with Bagdad and did not sever diplomatic relations with Saddam Hussein, although he did not recognize the annexation of Kuwait. In response, oil monarchies ceased all subsidies for Jordan and banished hundreds of thousands of its citizens. The Jordan economic crisis touched the bottom, and the currency collapsed. Contrary to any logic, King Hussein survived in these conditions, but his popularity among the subordinates peaked. It was because Saddam Hussein also regarded Israel as his enemy, and when the attacks of the USA against Iraq began, the Iraqi missiles hit Tel Aviv. That caused an outburst of enthusiasm among Palestinians, who comprise over half of the population of Jordan. Thus, the support of king Hussein for Iraq increased and consolidated his popularity among the masses, against the arguments of the economic crisis<sup>10</sup>.

When considering these conditions, it is possible to discuss the tie of the Hashemite against the opposition. The authorities were right to note that the outcome of the 1989 election meant the rise of fundamentalists. The past threat on the part of the secular left was no longer relevant. In these conditions, it was decided to involve the Brotherhood in the government, assigning it, of course, to the ministries not connected with real political or military power. For over a year, the Brotherhood was reasonable to reject the approv-

---

<sup>9</sup> A. Wąs, *Bracia Muzułmanie w Jordanii. Doktryna i organizacja Bractwa na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*, Lublin 2006, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> U. Dann, *King Hussein's Solidarity with Saddam Husajn: A Pattern of Behaviour?*, Tel Aviv 1990, p. 1; Ph. Robins, op.cit., pp. 177–179.

al of the posts. However, when the crisis deepened, it had to face a moral dilemma. The King pursued the anti-American policy, so supporting him became a duty. In 1991 Muslim Brothers became members of the government of Prime Minister Modar Badnar. The West expressed concern then as it was the first such situation. Muslim Brothers, however, received the ministries of Education, Justice, Health, Social Issues, and Waqf (religious institutions). This government continued to function until July 1991. The Brotherhood not only gained no further authority, but it also lost a greater part of its popularity, as it ruled in the situation of total economic crisis and the resolutions of its ministers, e.g., concerning strict gender separation at schools, did not bring popularity among a part of the society. With hindsight, the appointment of this government should be regarded as a masterstroke. After the defeat of Iraq in 1991, Amman slowly began retrieving its relations with the West, although it still had good relations with Baghdad. The Muslim Brotherhood was no longer needed in the government<sup>11</sup>.

## II. The Jordanian National Charter and the Multi-Party System

In 1991, specific changes occurred in the Kingdom's legislation. The state had a relatively liberal constitution from 1953. Its rules were not obeyed for decades, but in theory, it was possible to reflow it again. Meanwhile, there arose a strive to formulate the fundamental law again; however, instead of legislating a new constitution, they decided to keep the old one and, at the same time, to create the so-called National Charter. Several dozens of experts carried out the works over this document, and its frameworks were to compromise the views of the monarchists, the pan-Arabic left, and Islamic fundamentalists. The Charter was approved on June 9, 1991. The resolution was not adopted by the parliament elected in 1989, but the nationwide conference of two thousand delegates, who represented various professional groups, self-governments, and Bedouin tribes. The conference was supposed to represent the will of the nation and, what is noteworthy, there was consensus about it. Even the parliament did not oppose this procedure<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Sh. Bar, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan*, Tel Aviv 1998, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> A. Georg, op.cit., pp. 39–40.

The National Charter was a peculiar document. At the moment of its legislation, it was thought to be, in fact, a type of constitution. However, it somewhat resembled a declaration of intentions. To make things worse, these were the intentions of different groups. Thus, the sovereignty of the people and the inviolable sovereignty of the Hashemite as the descendants of Muhammed were declared simultaneously. It was declared that Jordan is a distinct state, and it was emphasized that Jordanians are an inseparable part of the Arab nation. The role of Islam as the source of all rights was also emphasized, and yet the protection of individual liberty was recognized. The text was more of a selection of wishes and declaration of various ambitions of the Arab intelligentsia rather than a regular constitution<sup>13</sup>. A striking point is how this act was legislated – without the legal parliament and without holding a referendum. It proves that parliamentarism was not firmly rooted in the mentality of Jordanians.

With hindsight, one may regard this situation as a maneuver of the authorities. The legislated act did not alter the constitution. Its importance soon turned out to be insignificant, and after 1999, the existence of the National Chart was, in reality, no longer mentioned. A peculiar legal nihilism of this procedure did not cause any objections. At the given moment, this act paved the way to resume the multi-party system. On June 7, 1991, the King announced the cancelation of martial law. In June 1992, the Chamber of Deputies outvoted the act that enabled a possibility to create political parties, and in September 1992, the status concerning their registration was announced. Within a short period, over twenty of them were registered, from communists to Islamic fundamentalists<sup>14</sup>.

### III. King's Counteroffensive

The Hashemite did not intend, however, to abandon the dominance in the political system. The overly strong parliament was not a partner but a threat. Additionally, after 1991, King Hussein I strived to make a treaty with Israel. In the conditions after the Cold War, this became a necessity. The power-

---

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/charter\\_national.html](http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/charter_national.html) (22.01.2018).

<sup>14</sup> Ph. Robins, *op.cit.*, p. 175.



ful opposition in the Chamber could be preclusive of such policy. That is why the King strived to weaken the Chamber of Deputies, and, interestingly, for this purpose, he did not make use of force but the very multi-party system.

In 1993, the first multi-party election since 1956 was announced. The Chamber was supposed to legislate the electoral system, and there were indeed discussions about it. Meanwhile, in 1993, the King dissolved the Chamber and imposed the electoral system through his decree. Some of its resolutions were quite substantial. For instance, the electoral system indicated that only political parties or individual candidates could partake in elections and that no other organizations or unions were allowed. Additionally, political agitation was not supposed to take place in buildings of such organizations. These affected, in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, it could not make use of a network of social organizations, and, first and foremost, it lost the possibility to agitate in mosques. The Brotherhood had to establish a typical political party, which was named the Islamic Action Front<sup>15</sup>.

First and foremost, however, a strict rule of one vote one candidate was introduced. In the case of tribal Jordan, this theoretically reasonable rule had unexpected consequences. The previous electoral system enabled the voter to cast a vote for two or sometimes more candidates. In the regions where identification with one's own tribe lingers, this enabled both to vote for a local candidate and a representative of some nationwide political party. Then this possibility disappeared. It must be added that electoral districts were not divided fairly. The north's extensive and populous cities had few deputies, while the poor and rural south appointed half of the seats<sup>16</sup>.

After such preparations on November 9, 1993, the election was held. The turnover dropped significantly. In 1989, it amounted to 67% of the entitled to vote, while in 1993, it was only 52%. The Islamic Action Front gained sixteen seats, and together with several independent fundamentalists, the group had twenty-one deputies. The left of all kinds gained eight seats. All the other seats were won by independent candidates who represented local interests. In general, it meant that they were the delegates of tribes. This situation made it easy for the government to get the majority as it was enough to find over for-

---

<sup>15</sup> H. Hourani, *Islamic Action Front Party*, Amman 1993, pp. 25–29; A. Wąs, *op.cit.*, pp. 211–212.

<sup>16</sup> *Jordan in Transition 1990–2000*, ed. G. Joffe, London 2002, pp. 77–114.

ty MPs who would support the government in exchange for addressing some local issues. In general, there were no problems with that<sup>17</sup>.

It must be emphasized that thanks to this policy, it was possible to sign the Wadi Araba Treaty on October 26, 1994. Both the Islamic Action Front and the left were against it. The government, however, gained the required majority, and street protests were suppressed with force. Thanks to that, Jordan regained significant credits and investments. The benefits of the economic revival, however, were not distributed equally. Nevertheless, the Hashemite achieved complete success<sup>18</sup>.

In November 1997, the next election took place. The Islamic Action Front was internally divided and aware of its weakness. Therefore, the Board announced a boycott of the election. Nevertheless, the election took place. Officially, the turnover amounted to 55%, but in Amman, it was only 26%. Due to the boycott, the Chamber did not include any deputies from the Islamic Action Front and the left. Interestingly, however, the National Constitution Party won only two seats. The Chamber was utterly dominated by independent representatives from the south or cities or professional groups from the north. This non-ideological parliament was a tool of the government. It implied another problem – the Chamber could not be a place of compromise and real political struggle<sup>19</sup>.

#### **IV. Summary**

On February 7, 1999, King Hussein I died after a long reign that lasted since 1953. His successor, Abd Allah II, has not changed the system. He has been applying it more strictly. In contrast to his father, he does not have a talent for populist gestures. Regarding basic constitutional norms, he has tightened the authoritative approach rather than alleviated it. An example of that may be that in June 2001, he dissolved the Chamber of Deputies, and he announced the new election no sooner than in June 2003. For two years, he ruled without the parliament. The election in 2003 confirmed the dominance of inde-

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Zdanecki, *Historia Bliskiego Wschodu w XX wieku*, Wrocław 2010, p. 465.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 463–464.

<sup>19</sup> A. Wąs, *op.cit.*, p. 217; J. Zdanecki, *op.cit.*, p. 467.

pendent representatives, while the opposition won a dozen of seats. Abd Allah II justifies his approach with safety issues<sup>20</sup>. That, however, does not mean reliance on military and police forces. The new King changed the attitude toward the social factor in recent years, but it is an issue that requires a separate discussion. Eventually, it must be stated that after 1989 the electoral competition, through which the Chamber of Deputies is appointed, was restored in Jordan. The Chamber itself has, theoretically, significant rights (legislating the budget, appointing the government). The elections are not rigged. However, the characteristics of the Jordan society and the monarch's strength caused that the real source of power is not the parliament but the King and the House of Hashemite.

## Literature

- Bar Sh., *The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan*, Tel Aviv 1998.
- Dann U., *King Hussein's Solidarity with Saddam Husajn: A Pattern of Behaviour?* Tel Aviv 1990.
- Georg A., *Jordan. Living in The Crossfire*, London–New York 2005.
- Hourani H., *Islamic Action Front Party*, Amman 1993.
- Jordan in Transition 1990–2000*, ed. G. Joffe, London 2002.
- Lunt J., *The Arab Legion*, London 1999.
- Milton-Edwards B., Hinchcliffe P., *Jordan, A Hashemite Legacy*, London–New York 2009.
- Robins Ph., *A History of Jordan*, Cambridge 2004.
- Salibi K., *The Modern History of Jordan*, London–New York 1993.
- Wąs A., *Bracia Muzułmanie w Jordanii. Doktryna i organizacja Bractwa na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*, Lublin 2006.
- Wróblewski B., *Jordania*, Warsaw 2011.
- Zdanecki J., *Historia Bliskiego Wschodu w XX wieku*, Wrocław 2010.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ph. Robins, *op.cit.*, pp. 202–204.